

# WITH THE **BRAVEST**

The Untold Story of the  
Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II



**ERNESTO M. ESPALDON, M.D.**

Foreword by  
President FIDEL V. RAMOS





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*To the memory of  
Claudia Mercader and Cipriano Acuna Espaldon, my parents,  
and all the other dedicated pioneer educators  
who chose to work in the province of Sulu before World War II*

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The cover photo is of the "Sulu Warrior" of World War II  
sculpted by foremost Muslim sculptor, Professor  
Abdulmari Imao. Subject of sculpture was  
Captain Abdulhalim Imao of the Sulu Area Command.

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## Foreword

Little has been written about the Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II and the little that was put to print is wanting in accuracy.

This book has been in continuous preparation by its author for over a decade, recounting events from memory, researching, gathering records available, communicating with and interviewing surviving former comrades-in-arms, all of them now in their twilight years. This project has brought him all over the country and even to foreign lands including the United States and Malaysia.

The author fought alongside the gallant Sulu warriors of World War II as a fighting lineman and later as one of its commanders, suffering with them the most bitter privations during those dark and grim days of Japanese occupation.

This book is not only a story of sufferings, of deprivations, of continuous brutal enemy assaults, but also of character and glory. It presents vivid portraits of courageous men fighting against overwhelming odds, of moving sagas of survival, of untimely deaths. What the Sulu guerrillas had gone through were demonstrations to future generations that when the true test came, the people of Sulu were never found wanting. Unless the stories of these gallant warriors are put to print, they will be lost forever.

The Sulu archipelago lying directly in the sea-lane from Japan to its source of oil and raw materials in British North Borneo and the Dutch East Indies, suffered the brunt of the early invasion of a rampaging enemy.

Constantly attacked by Japanese forces, the fledgling guerrilla forces of Sulu faced complete annihilation but for the major defeat of the large enemy fleet by American Naval Task Force 58 in the crucial Battle of the Philippine Sea on June 19 - 20, 1944, where Sulu guerrillas played a peripheral role. This event caused the massive Japanese force attacking the decimated, grim and gaunt Sulu guerrillas, to lift its encirclement. It gave the Freedom Fighters a breathing spell.

When arms and ammunition started to arrive by submarine the Sulu Freedom Fighters, rejuvenated in their ranks by hundreds of fresh volunteers, bounded back and fought with a vengeance. Their increasing audacity to carry the fight against stronger and better armed Japanese forces must have astonished the enemy. The fight between the Sulu warriors and the Japanese forces was brutal and with no quarters given. During the final phase of the Sulu campaign, in the mopping-up operations, the Japanese troops refused to surrender to the guerrillas and to quote a guerrilla commander, Captain Calvin Navata, "They were doomed to be wiped out." Only those who reached American lines in the Jolo island campaign were taken prisoners. Some who succeeded in daring escapes to Borneo from Tawi-Tawi by kumpit and bamboo rafts also survived.

The Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II preserved a tradition set by Sulu warriors of old, who battled the Spanish conquistadors for over three centuries at the height of their power, to remain free; of gallant warriors who, at the turn of the century, stubbornly resisted American forces armed with artillery and rapid-firing gatling guns and risked annihilation to preserve their freedom. The Sulu warriors of World War II, trapped in the island of Tawi-Tawi, attacked by overwhelming Japanese forces by land, air and sea resisted and fought ferociously and were almost completely annihilated. They bounced back when arms and ammunition started arriving by submarine, extracted the heaviest toll from the enemy and prevailed. They preserved a tradition, drove what was left of the decimated enemy forces from their shores, and remained free.

The epic defense by the Sulu Freedom Fighters was among the outstanding sagas of Filipino heroism demonstrated in the Philippine-wide guerrilla resistance movement during the Second World War.



Fidel V. Ramos  
President  
Republic of the Philippines

Malacañan Palace  
Manila  
April 1994

## Preface

Many of the stories in this book are my personal experiences in the guerrilla war against the Japanese in Sulu during World War II. Additional information was taken from official reports and records sent to the headquarters of the Sulu Area Command (SAC), of which I have some copies. Other information came from personal interviews and communications with former comrades-in-arms, some of them now deceased.

My experiences were those as an enlisted man and later as officer of the SAC. My proficiency with the typewriter helped me gain the confidence of the commanding officers at the company level and later at the battalion level. This also facilitated my close contact with all of them. When I became an officer, I again had the good fortune of working closely with Capt. Maximiniano Velasquez, adjutant of the SAC and who was also the executive officer of Col. Alejandro Suarez, overall commander of the guerrilla forces in Sulu. Such connections gave me a good overview of the activities at all levels of the Sulu guerrilla movement.

When the war ended in mid-1945, the SAC, the Zamboanga Guerrilla Organization, and the Misamis Guerrilla Organization were merged to form a new Philippine Army regiment, the 61st Infantry Regiment with headquarters in Pasonanca, Zamboanga City. Colonel Alejandro Suarez of the SAC was appointed commanding officer of the new regiment. He in turn picked Captain Velasquez and me to work with him in his new regimental staff, the former as the new regimental operations officer (S-3) and me as the regimental assistant adjutant and liaison officer. In our new designations, Velasquez and I had the opportunity to work together very closely once more.

On 9 December 1945, Capt. Velasquez was officially appointed by Col. Suarez, in addition to his other duties, as historian to write the official history of the Sulu Area Command. This was to form part of the official history of the Philippine Army. The order further required submission of the report not later than 31 December 1945.



## **x : Preface**

Capt. Velasquez frantically tried to work on the project, with me ~~assisting~~ him by gathering as much material needed and helping him write part of the report. But, with the limited time to organize and piece together the loose data, only a partial report could be submitted. For my help, Capt. Velasquez gave me a copy of the partial report. Capt. Velasquez promised to write a more detailed history at a future date.

Capt. Velasquez was discharged from the Army a few months later and returned to his former job as academic supervisor of the Department of Education in Sulu. In early April 1951, he was sent as a Fulbright scholar to the Graduate School of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana, Illinois. He obtained his doctorate in education in 1953, specializing in vocational guidance and personnel work, and returned to the Philippines shortly after.

Meanwhile I finished my medical studies at the University of Santo Tomas in 1954 and immediately went to the United States for my post-graduate training. When I returned to the Philippines in 1961 I learned that Dr. Velasquez had passed away from a kidney disease he contracted while in the jungles of Tawi-Tawi. His dream of writing a detailed history of the Sulu Area Command died with him.

When he died, I decided to complete his dream of writing the untold story of the Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II. Destiny, however, intervened and I found myself working in Guam. This venue has given me the opportunity to do medical missionary work in Micronesia and in Mindanao starting in 1970. My biannual visits to Mindanao, particularly to Tawi-Tawi, Basilan, Sulu and Zamboanga gave me the opportunity to contact my former comrades-in-arms. Those I could not personally meet, I touched base with through letters. This project also brought me to foreign countries, particularly the United States and Malaysia.

Over the years I have compiled all the data I could gather for the book, interviewed scores of people and read numerous books and articles about World War II. Then, for over a decade I organized and pieced together loose data and information and started writing the draft of the book. I also have records about the Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II and unless they are compiled, written and finally printed in black and white, they will be lost forever, or records less accurate might surface.

Here are the names of some of my informants, most of them my comrades-in-arms, whom I personally contacted, interviewed, or com-

municated with. The approximate time, venue of contact and present whereabouts are noted:

1. Lt. Julhari Sapal (1974), mayor of Simunul, Tawi-Tawi; now deceased;
2. Pfc. Singah Alam (1974-1980), professor, University of Western Mindanao, Zamboanga City;
3. Lt. Yusop Kalbit (1974-1980), major, Police Force, Zamboanga City;
4. Lt. Romulo M. Espaldon (1974-1995), ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Zamboanga City, Jolo, Manila;
5. Pvt. Abdulwahid Bidin (1994), associate justice of the Supreme Court; Manila; now retired;
6. Capt. Fabian Sindayen (1954, 1975), businessman, Sulu; now deceased;
7. Capt. Calvin Navata (1995), businessman, New York City, N.Y.; now retired;
8. Mrs. Mary Velasquez (1995), Chicago, Illinois; now retired;
9. Capt. Maximiniano Velasquez (1953), Manila; now deceased;
10. Pvt. Datu Bin Harun Mustapha (1995), former chief minister of Sabah, Kota Kinabalo, Malaysia;
11. Capt. Saberalam Maut (1962, 1963, 1995), colonel, Philippine Army; Zamboanga City and Manila;
12. Capt. Abdulrahim Imao (1978, 1995), major, Philippine Army; Zamboanga City; now retired;
13. Sculptor Abdulmari Imao (1985, 1990), professor; Manila;
14. Pfc. Nassal Alian (1990), former regional director of Education; Zamboanga City; retired;
15. Cpl. Uddin Anuddin (1978), former superintendent of schools; Tawi-Tawi; now retired;
16. First Sergeant Uto Sabuddin (1980), Bato-Bato, Tawi-Tawi; now deceased;
17. Pvt. Alam Basaluddin (1975), Jolo, Sulu; now with Jolo media;
18. Capt. Abdulhamid Lukman (1977, 1995), assistant commissioner of Muslim Affairs, Jolo, Sulu and Zamboanga City;
19. Lt. Wadjad Jumah (1975), Philippine Constabulary; now retired;
20. Pvt. Tegway Lim (1990), Los Angeles, California; businessman; now retired;
21. Lt. Washington Strattan (1980, 1990, 1993), aircraft engineer; Los Angeles, California; now deceased;
22. Sgt. Addak Asmad (1976, 1980), chief of police, Simunul, Tawi-Tawi; now deceased;
23. Sgt. Muhiddin Asmad (1976, 1980), businessman; Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; retired;
24. Sgt. Amman Musibah (1980), businessman; now retired;
25. Datu Alawangsa Amilbanga (1980), political assistant, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; now retired;
26. Princess Putli Amilbanga (1980, 1991), Zamboanga City; businesswoman; retired;
27. Capt. Engracio Guligado (1990, 1992), colonel, Philippine Army; now retired;
28. Lt. Ahmad Bagis (1974, 1993), councilor, Jolo, Sulu; deceased;
29. Pfc. Benjamin Rodriguez (1995), Manila, editor-in-chief, *Manila Bulletin*;
30. Pfc. Demetrio Gaspar (1979), teacher, Siasi, Sulu; retired;
31. Lt. Will Escudero (1990-1993), attorney, Davao City; now deceased;
32. Lt. Tianso Quana (1977), Pagadian City; businessman;
33. Lt. Saldin Alibasa (1978), Zamboanga City; businessman, now deceased;
34. Lt. Ismael Kiram (1978), Zamboanga City; businessman; now deceased;
35. Capt. Yasin Bagis (1975), businessman, Jolo, Sulu; now deceased;
36. Lt. Pajawa Itum (1975), businessman; Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; now deceased;
37. Capt. Federico Lacsamana (1990), physician, San Fernando, La Union; now retired;
38. Capt. Maximino Molijon (1978), Zamboanga City; businessman;
39. Lt. Hilarion Medina (1983), Puerto Princesa; teacher; now retired;

40. Capt. Ismael Ratag (1976), colonel, Philippine Army; now deceased;
  41. Lt. Hussin Ratag (1976), Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; supervising teacher; deceased;
  42. Mrs. Antonia Surian, wife of Lt. Talb Surian (1982 in Los Angeles, California);
  43. Cpl. Matayang Adil (1974), mayor of Simunul; now deceased;
  44. Cpl. Habibun Nara (1987), businessman; Bakong, Simunul; retired;
  45. Cpl. Marurun Tajalla (1974, 1993), hadji and businessman;
  46. Cpl. Ara Bada (1974, 1986), lieutenant, Philippine Constabulary; retired;
  47. Pvt. Aminkadra Abubakar (1974), mayor of Jola; businessman;
  48. Pvt. Indin Noh (1975), superintendent of schools, Pagadian City, Zamboanga del Sur; retired;
  49. Pfc. Ulama Rizal (1990, Manila), teacher; retired;
  50. Cpl. Buzon Sarabi (1980), hadji, businessman; Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; retired;
  51. Lt. Hussin Hasim (1975), businessman; Zamboanga City; now deceased;
  52. Sgt. Maheya Naduha (1981), academic supervisor, Dept. of Education, Manukmongka, Tawi-Tawi; retired.
-

## Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express his deep appreciation to all the persons whose assistance made this book possible. He is especially grateful to President Fidel V. Ramos, who was kind enough to honor the memory of the Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II by writing the foreword of this book.

Special thanks are due to Ambassador Romulo M. Espaldon, for his encouragement in getting me to put into print the epic saga of the guerrilla warriors with whom we fought as teenagers; to Capt. Calvin Navata, commander of the fightingest unit, the Combat Company, for sharing with me some details of his unit's involvement in the liberation of Jolo island; to Col. Saberalam Maut who reminisced with me on the sacrifices we went through together in the jungles of Tawi-Tawi; to Col. Engracio Guligado, who recounted the campaign to rid Sanga-Sanga and its airfields of enemy forces; to Major Abdulrahim Imao of the famed "Fighting Twenty-One."

I am also grateful to Jolo Councilor Ahmad Bagis, Major Hadji Yusop Kalbit, and Benjamin Rodriguez, editor-in-chief of *The Manila Bulletin*; to Professor Abdulmari Imao, foremost Muslim sculptor, who kindly gave me permission to use the picture of one of his works, "The Muslim Warrior." The subject of the sculpture was one of our gallant officers, Capt. Abdulhalim Imao. Thanks are also due to the late Dr. Maximiniano Velasquez, my mentor during our guerrilla days; to Datu Alawangsa Amilbanga and to Mrs. Betty Sindayen. My sincere thanks also go to former chief minister of Sabah, Datu Tun Mustapha Bin Harun, whose vivid recollections of our guerrilla years put a focus on certain important events.

Particular thanks go to Arlene E. Ramos, Dan Wilson, Noel Luna and Roy Aguilar, whose editorial assistance have been invaluable. In this connection, the encouragement and support of my wife, Lettie, and of my son, Ernesto Jr., were of immense help. I also owe thanks to my granddaughter Tamina Ramos, to Nadine Daga, and John Nededog for working long hours typing the drafts of the manuscript.







## Introduction: **Sulu and War**

**T**he history of Sulu is that of a continuous fight for freedom. It is replete with stories, both recorded and unrecorded, of uncommon valor and incredible heroism in combat—the legacy of a race which fights unto death to remain free.

The Sulu warriors stood their ground and resisted Spanish rule for over three centuries. They proved to be too strong for the conquistadores to subdue. Such tenacity is said to be unparalleled in the annals of military conquests anywhere in the world.

When the American forces arrived to garrison Sulu in 1899 after the Treaty of Paris, the natives defied the new invaders. Tampering with native customs and traditions, and imposing taxes upon occupying their land, the Americans caused bitter resentment among the natives. Such resentment subsequently erupted into a bloody uprising which the Americans found too costly to contain.

Up against a seasoned military force equipped with artillery, gatling guns and the Krag, the Sulu warriors did not stand a chance, yet they kept challenging the American forces in combat. Typical examples of such fierce courage were the “Battle of the Clouds” at Bud Daho in 1906 and at Bud Bagsak in 1913 where the natives gallantly fought a losing battle. Armed only with their kris (a wavy-edged sword with a double cutting edge) and spears, they rushed toward enemy lines, only to be mowed down by murderous artillery barrage and rapid fire from gatling guns. The result of these two encounters was all too predictable, yet the Freedom Fighters’ suicidal defense of their integrity as a free race was awe-inspiring.

Gen. John J. Pershing, commander of the American forces assigned to tame Sulu, stated thus in his letter to the governor-general in Manila:

## 2: Introduction

The nature of the Joloano Moro is such that he is not at all over-awed or impressed by an overwhelming force. If he takes a notion to fight, it is regardless of the number of men he thinks are to be brought against him.\*

During World War II, the guerrilla defenders of Sulu would once again live up to Gen. Pershing's description. Despite the Japanese invaders' far superior numbers, firepower and supplies, the Sulu warriors were as tenacious and indomitable as their ancestors had been.

Jolo was to be used as the launching pad for the Japanese invasion of oil-rich British North Borneo and the Dutch East Indies. Thus the island was teeming with enemy troops. Lying directly on the sea route between Japan and its objectives in the southwest Pacific area, Sulu archipelago's most strategic location became its misfortune.

The massive invasion of Sulu at Kaunayan Beach, Patikul, by the Japanese on 24 December 1941 decidedly routed the archipelago's defenders, led by Lt. Col. Alejandro Suarez. The subsequent occupation of Sulu was marked by killings, rape and plunder. The arrogant and cruel invaders slapped, kicked, gun-buffed and even bayoneted civilians for the flimsiest reason. A puppet government was installed to aid the Japanese in their control of the populace.

Despite being injured in the defense of Kaunayan Beach, Col. Suarez proceeded through Tawi-Tawi and Siasi on his way to report to Gen. Fort in Zamboanga. Suarez ordered his guerrilla forces in Bato-Bato and Siasi to lie low, but to hold on to their weapons and never to surrender. He promised to send them help and return soon.

In May 1942, Suarez was imprisoned in a concentration camp in Lanao when Gen. Fort surrendered his Mindanao USAFFE (U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East) forces to the Japanese. But eight months later, in January 1943, Suarez effected a daring escape and returned to Tawi-Tawi.

In the months to come, Suarez reorganized the Freedom Fighters and put in place an underground government to aid the resistance.

In addition to battling the Japanese on land, the Freedom Fighters became an important part of the Allied naval war. In June 1943, Capt. Frank Young, a native of Sulu, returned from General Headquarters

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\*Vic Hurley, *Swish of the Kris: The Story of Moros* (N. York: E. P. Dutton, 1936), Filipiniana Reprint Series (Manila), pp. 13-16.

(GHQ) Australia with transceivers for a mobile radio unit. From this point on the guerrillas were able to send vital intelligence information to GHQ Australia regarding not only enemy troop movements in Sulu, but sea and air movements in Sulu, British North Borneo and the Celebes.

The Sulu guerrillas' intelligence activities led to the sinking by Allied submarines of hundreds of thousands of Japanese shipping tonnage and scores of transport ships loaded with enemy troops bound for the battlefronts in the southern Pacific.

The gallant Sulu warriors' underground activities and resolute resistance did not go unnoticed by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. He credited their activities by separating them from the Mindanao forces of Col. Fertig and establishing the Sulu Area Command with Col. Suarez as commander.

The new Sulu Area Command concentrated on gathering intelligence information while avoiding armed conflict with the enemy. Sometime in September 1943, the Japanese started to build Bongao Island, adjacent to the southern tip of Tawi-Tawi Island, into a mighty naval base. The island had been an anchorage for the U.S. Pacific Fleet before the outbreak of the war. The Japanese used forced labor from the outlying areas to build their naval base.

The enemy also began the expansion of the Sanga-Sanga airfield at the southern tip of Tawi-Tawi. The guerrilla base of operations in Bato-Bato was only 12 miles away from the airstrip.

In early 1944 the Japanese Naval Command decided to use Tawi-Tawi as the base of its largest remaining fleet, the First Combined Mobile Naval Fleet under the command of Vice-Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa. Bombing and strafing raids on guerrilla positions in the region intensified. Food in secret jungle storage huts was rapidly depleted. One shipment of rare arms, ammunition and supplies came by submarine in March 1944, and was transferred in perilous missions on the open seas. On 12 April 1944, and through May and June, the enemy launched a massive series of attacks designed to wipe out the Sulu Freedom Fighters.

After several weeks of brave resistance, greatly outnumbered and outgunned, the guerrillas knew their chances of coming out alive were almost nil. Food was scarce or unavailable. Malaria was epidemic among the starving men. Finally the relentless enemy attacks on his dwindling force compelled Col. Suarez to order them to break up into smaller groups and to avoid enemy contact.

#### 4 : Introduction

Ironically, it was during this retreat that the guerrillas made a discovery that helped lead to a crucial naval victory. While traveling northward along the island's coast, the gaunt and ill-fed warriors spotted Admiral Ozawa's fleet on the southwestern horizon.

This information, relayed to GHQ Australia through Capt. Young's mobile radio unit, along with the later flash message that the fleet had departed, warned to the U.S. naval command in advance and allowed it to reroute its transport ships out of harm's way, and in their place send in the fearsome Task Force 58.

The resulting clash of Japanese and American fleets became known as "The Battle of the Philippine Sea," and led to the sinking of three Japanese aircraft carriers and two oil tankers, damage to one battleship and three cruisers, and the destruction of over 400 aircraft.

Of the original 1,200 Freedom Fighters at the start of the massive enemy assaults three months earlier, only 187 were able to regroup at the new headquarters in Languyan, in northwestern Tawi-Tawi. Many had been killed in combat. More had succumbed to starvation and disease. Still others were captured and beheaded by the Japanese.

But with the routing of Admiral Ozawa's fleet, and the regrouping of the guerrilla forces along with fresh volunteer fighters, the stage was set for a reversal of fortunes in the jungle war. By early 1945, at the height of the guerrilla offensives the enemy was thrown into total disarray, their supplies and reinforcements effectively cut off. In fact, Japanese defeat was so complete that when American forces arrived on Sanga-Sanga and Kaunayan Beaches in April, not a shot was fired. Instead, the U.S. Army was greeted by Sulu Freedom Fighters.

How the warriors of the Sulu Area Command stuck together, looked at death eyeball-to-eyeball, and exacted their own measure of casualties on the enemy was one of the most incredible stories of the war. The author was one of those fortunate enough to have survived this ordeal.

Years after the war, in 1991, Mr. Shinichi Toda, a Japanese freelance photojournalist working for a Japanese cable company, visited Jolo to gather materials for his project in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Pacific War. He met and interviewed Capt. Calvin Navata (Ret.), the surviving commander of the "Combat" Company which was dubbed the "fightingest" unit of the Sulu Area Command.

Toda told Navata about the book *A Diary of a Defeat* written by Akiyoshi Fujioka, a Japanese survivor of the Jolo campaign who was lucky

enough to return to Japan alive and tell his story. In his book, Fujioka estimated that over 3,000 Japanese soldiers were in Jolo during the final period of the war. He also estimated that fewer than three percent made it back home alive. This casualty rate of Japanese Imperial Forces was practically unparalleled anywhere else during the entire course of the war. Toda was particularly interested in knowing why only a handful of prisoners were taken in the Sulu campaign.

Capt. Navata couldn't help but be candid in his reply:

Most of the surviving Japanese forces during the final days of the mopping-up operations were holed up in the Mt. Tumantangis area. The ruthless conquerors who put thousands of Filipinos to the sword had only four options, [each] no less unattractive than the others: surrender and die, run away and perish, fight and get killed, or commit hara-kiri.

*Hagakure*, the main theme of the Bushido Code, states, "A Samurai lives in such a way that he will always be prepared to die." The Japanese fought to the end against the Sulu warriors, their worthy opponents who were equally unafraid of death. Historically, for the Sulu warriors who fought against the Spanish conquistadores for over three centuries, who defied General Pershing in the Battle of the Clouds, who stood up to the Japanese invaders in World War II, war was an integral part of life.

Indeed, the annals of the Sulu Freedom Fighters who defied overwhelming odds against successive waves of invading forces are replete with tales of uncommon valor, raw courage and grim determination to fight to the last drop of their blood to protect their land from foreign domination. There is no doubt that they prevailed for they preserved their traditions and remained free.





## Chapter I **The Beginnings of War**

**F**or the Sulu High School students 1941 was an exciting year, especially the junior class of which I was president. That year, we won the championship in the interscholastic meet, even as Juaini Mohammad, a freshman, was voted best athlete. We also won in the drill team competition. As a bonus, our platoon commander, Cadet Capt. Agapito Agarin, allowed platoon members to have their own sponsors in the pictures that were taken.

Rumors about an impending war permeated the campus, but we couldn't care less. The general perception was that should war break out, the American forces would easily destroy those "Made in Japan" enemy planes and warships.

I was more eager to see our school paper, *The Pearl* come out, as it would carry the honor roll for the third grading period. Halim Abubakar was our editor. I was informed that I had bested Marcelino Bueno who had been the smartest since our first year. Not far behind were Abdulwahid Bidin and Alma Abubakar. Bueno eventually became a successful lawyer, Alma Abubakar a physician, and Bidin the first Muslim associate justice of the Supreme Court.

In the senior class, my brother Romulo (or "Mulo," as we called him) tied with Ben Obsequio for first honor. Years later, Obsequio had a brilliant career as an obstetrician, while my brother became rear admiral in the Philippine Navy and later on, first governor of Tawi-Tawi. Sulu High School was not lacking in leaders.

By the end of October 1941, people were getting jittery about the war. Patriotic songs were frequently played on radio. Even our school programs and convocations were invariably dominated by nationalist themes. The Monday before the outbreak of the war was the Junior Class organization's turn to conduct the weekly convocation. Ahmad Bagis, who emceed the program, read a translation of the Philippine National Anthem in Tausug, Sulu's native tongue. I recited a poem by Carlos P.

Romulo, editor of the DMHM chain of newspapers. I vividly recall the last stanza, which reads:

Out of the lusty green of these seven thousand isles, out of the heart string of the sixteen million people all vibrating to one song, I will make the mighty pattern of my pledge: I am a Filipino, born to freedom and I will not rest until freedom shall have been added onto my inheritance for myself, my children and my children's children forever.

### **Japan's Attack on Pearl Harbor**

On 7 December 1941 a massive Japanese air assault struck Pearl Harbor without warning, and the furious attack caused so much destruction and loss of lives that it drew the U.S. straight into the war. In the Philippines, it was the 8th of December.

The next afternoon, our school principal, Mr. Salvador Lopez, officially announced to the student body and the faculty the outbreak of the war, saying he was only awaiting orders to close the school.

Sadness permeated the school campus, but in a strange way we were also excited as some of our bigger and older schoolmates proceeded to volunteer with the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). Soon we were watching them do fancy drills at the Philippine Army grounds nearby.

We younger students felt left out, but then came the announcement that we could join the Volunteer Guards as first-aiders and runners. My brother Mulo and I were among the first batch of volunteers. While most of the students from the remote villages started to leave for home, about thirty of us stayed behind to enlist in the Volunteer Guards. We agreed to meet regularly at the Jolo Central School building. Mr. John McCormick, superintendent of schools, was appointed overall coordinator of the civilian organizations.

We were organized into three groups of 10 that alternated duties. In my group were Mulo, my classmate and roommate Cesar Gepigon, Abdulhamid Soon, Boy Soriano, Jailani Waraji, Soriano Eddun and Bonifacio Yanga. There were also girls in our group including the twins, Indalecia and Eufracia Durano, and Lina Elum. Abdulhamid, the oldest in the group, was appointed team leader.

## 8 : Beginnings of War

Speakers gave pep talks to the Volunteer Guards regularly. A doctor instructed us on first-aid work, while an Army officer explained our duties, especially during air raids. Mayor Magno gave an inspirational talk on democracy, and Mr. McCormick lectured on freedom and love of country. But this exciting phase of my early involvement in the war was shortlived.

On 22 December 1941 my father arrived on the last trip of the *MS Carron*, a motorboat that shuttled between Tawi-Tawi and Jolo. He came to fetch Mulo, my sister Fe who was a freshman, and me. With him was his good friend Datu Amilbangsa, Mayor of Simunul, Tawi-Tawi. Amilbangsa was also worried about his daughter, Dayang Putli, who was Fe's classmate. Getting transportation back to Tawi-Tawi, which was 120 nautical miles away, was difficult, but the Datu and my father were able to charter a large *kumpit*, with boatmen to boot, to take us home to Ubol, Simunul.

We had barely readjusted to life at home when the grim realities of the war started to sink in. Information reached us that on 24 December, a large contingent of Japanese troops had landed before dawn at Kaunayan Beach, six miles north of Jolo. They staged a blitzkrieg on the town after routing the small composite defense force of Philippine Army, Philippine Scouts and the Constabulary troops under Lt. Col. Alejandro Suarez.

Suarez himself sustained a bayonet wound in the forearm in hand-to-hand combat that early morning. Several of our schoolmates whose fancy drills we had watched a few weeks back were reportedly killed in action. Mr. Federico Saada, our premilitary cadet training instructor and a stern disciplinarian, was also among the initial casualties.

As enemy troops rapidly advanced toward Asturias, headquarters of the Philippine Constabulary, Jolo Central School—station of some Volunteer Guards—was peppered with machine gun bullets. Among those killed were members of my former group, including Cesar Gepigon and Mr. McCormick. Japanese planes also strafed population centers, killing many civilians, among them Eufracia Durano, another member of our volunteer group.

A reign of terror marked the weeks that followed the invasion. More than 20,000 Japanese troops were reported to have landed and occupied the town. Local leaders were rounded up and beheaded. Treated with particular viciousness were the Chinese members of the Kuomintang

Party who were arrested, tortured and bayoneted. The Japanese were especially infuriated with them because of the resistance Kuomintang Party head Chang Kai-Sek and his compatriots were giving the Japanese in China.\* Rape and other atrocities were rampant.

The Japanese Kempeitai were able to easily round up people marked for execution with the help of former Japanese Jolo residents. They were managers and employees of Kasiwagi's store, the lone Japanese business establishment in downtown Jolo. They turned out to be officers and spies of the Japanese Imperial forces.

Among their prominent victims were Henry Tan, president of the Kuomintang Party; Tan Sin Kok, owner of the first three-story building in the town; Manchun Loong, the Cantonese owner of the largest store in Tulay; and Robert Tay, president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and vice-mayor of Jolo. All were beheaded.

With the defeat of the local military defenders, Suarez and the remnants of his troops withdrew to the hills. Employing guerrilla tactics to harass the Japanese was not feasible because of the enemy's superiority in number and weaponry. Outlaws operating in the interior of the island also harassed the guerrillas for the latter's firearms. A number of guerrillas lost their lives at the hands of the outlaws.

Meanwhile, Col. Suarez proceeded to Siasi, along with some of his men, to recuperate from his wounds. He ordered the small but still intact unit of Constabulary troops in the town under Sgt. Baldomero Santos, not to surrender and to wait for food, firearms, and possibly funds from Zamboanga. From Siasi, Col. Suarez proceeded southward to Bato-Bato in Tawi-Tawi where he similarly instructed the local Constabulary detachment of 30 men under 1st Lt. Alejandro Trespeces to hold fort, even as he bade them to withdraw to the hills in case of enemy attack.

Suarez promised both units that he would return soon from Zamboanga. As provincial inspector and acting governor of Sulu, his words carried much weight.

The occupation forces established detachments in the major towns of Jolo island. Jolo town itself was ringed with outposts manned by arrogant guards. The Japanese sentries demanded that all civilians bow prop-

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\* At this time, the local Kuomintang party had active party members who were also sending financial help to China.

## **10: Beginnings of War**

erly to them. Failure to do so could mean a slap on the face, a blow in the head or a gunbutt in the body. They terrorized civilians into submission, and beheadings were done in public. Some of the menfolk went on a suicidal rampage (locally known as "juramentado"), but they were easily captured, tortured and beheaded.

A native who was caught by a Japanese sentry while trying to enter the town with a kris ingenuously concealed inside a hollowed-out gourd called "upo," was also publicly executed. He was tied up, spread-eagled on two trees, and bayoneted to death.

News of such savagery reached us in Ubol. All we could do then was gnash our teeth in suppressed anger and curse the Japanese to high heavens.

### **The Sulu High School Class of 1941**

Throughout the war, sons of the Sulu High School and its affiliate, the Sulu Trade School, rallied to the defense of the motherland by the hundreds. Under the USAFFE (United Armed Forces in the Far East) they fought the Japanese forces when they first invaded the country, then continued to fight them in the vicious guerrilla war that followed. Some secretly served the cause even when employed by the enemy. Indeed they redeemed that pledge in the last strains of the Philippine National Anthem, "Ang mamatay nang dahil sa iyo" (To die for you—our motherland). Many made the ultimate sacrifice.

To mention a few, from among the different high school classes—Capt. Abdulrahim Imao of the famous "Fighting Twenty-One," belonged to the class of 1939; I belonged to the class of 1943, but the standout was easily the class of 1941. Placed in that position by circumstances not common with the other classes, the class members stood out over their other schoolmates in the resistance movement.

As the war clouds were darkening over Asia and the Pacific in the early 1940s, the political and military leadership of the Philippine Commonwealth Government decided to accelerate the buildup of the country's defenses. One measure adopted was the augmentation of the army reserves—the product of military training of cadres for five and one-half months throughout the country. One ready source of manpower was the batch of young men graduating from the country's high schools, starting with the class of 1941.



On 1 April 1941, right after graduation from Sulu High School, roughly one-half of the members of the class eligible for the draft reported for military duty at the training center in Davao City, while the other half enlisted at the First Sulu Cadre Center in Jolo.

On that sunny April morning, two dejected seventeen-year-olds sat on the lower steps of the Augur Barracks in Jolo watching enviously as their proud classmates fell into formation at the huge quadrangle.

They had already been rejected twice for military service, for failure to meet the minimum age requirement; once when the mustering order was released and their names were not on the list, and again, that very morning, when they volunteered for service and were turned down.

They watched in resignation during the roll call, and listened to the enthusiastic "Here's!" echoed across the quad after each name was called. Then near the end of the list, one name was called and there was no response. A few more "Here's!" and then the last name was called. Silence...

There was a stir in the ranks. Lt. Vasquez, the assistant cadre commander, looked in the direction of the two excited boys. The brief electrifying moment seemed like an eternity to them. Then the commander called the two to fill the gap. Grinning from ear to ear as their classmates cheered them on, with a hop, skip, and jump, the two boys took their places in the ranks. They stood tall! They were Fabian Sindayen and Calvin Navata, who were bosom friends. Although they came from places far apart, their relationship clicked the very first day they entered high school. Their friendship blossomed and stood the test of time.

Sindayen's father, Tiburcio, came from Alaminos, Pangasinan and he was among the pioneer school teachers who came to Sulu in the 1910s. He later served with the medical unit of the Sulu Area Command. His mother was Tausug (literally, "people of the current") from Lugus island, in the central Sulu group, a land of brave warriors.

Navata's father Dionisio left Agno, also in Pangasinan, in quest of adventure when he was 18, eventually landing in Jolo. He served briefly with the Philippine Constabulary, then shifted to the civilian Bureau of Health. When the war broke out, he served with the medical unit of the USAFFE and became one of the first casualties when the Japanese invaded Jolo on 24 December 1941, the day he turned 43. Navata's mother, Dayang Dayang Masdum, also a Tausug from Luuk

on eastern Jolo island, was the daughter of Datu Uyong who belonged to the royal family that ruled the sultanate of Sulu for several centuries.

With their Tausug warrior heritage, the adventurous spirit of the Ilocano, and the flame of youth egged on by fraternal competition and one-upmanship, the two initial rejects went on to become among the most outstanding officers of the Sulu guerrilla movement.

### **A Puppet Government Established**

The concentration of Japanese troops in Jolo, which was used as a spring-board for their invasion of the rich oilfields of British North Borneo and the Dutch East Indies, started to taper off after several months. This was followed by the establishment of a puppet government, and surprisingly enough, the Japanese seemed to know beforehand who would be the most effective local leader to head the puppet government.

The obvious choice was Ombra Amilbangsa, who was well-loved and respected by the people of Sulu. He was not only a former governor but also a former congressman of the province for several terms. In addition, he was also a claimant to the throne of the sultanate of Sulu. His wife, Dayang-Dayang Hadji Piandao, niece of the late Sultan Jamalul Kiram, was the most powerful among the leaders of the royal families of Sulu.

Ombra Amilbangsa had been in hiding at Luuk Maulana in Pandami island in the Siasi district, but the Japanese had little difficulty tracing his whereabouts. They sent an emissary to offer him the governorship, along with a promise of support for his claim to the sultanate of Sulu and Sabah in Borneo. But there was a veiled threat on his life should he turn down the offer.

Ombra came out of hiding and was accorded the honor and respect due a reigning sultan by the Japanese command. He accepted the offer, as he felt that the position would give him a better opportunity to protect his people from the atrocities of the enemy. With him at the helm of the local government, a good number of former Commonwealth provincial officials returned to their former jobs. Among them was his father, Datu Amilbangsa, who resumed his post as mayor of Simunul with an office at Ubol village. The datu, as mentioned earlier, was a close friend of my father, the principal of the Ubol Elementary School, before the outbreak of the war. Gov. Ombra was also a former student of my father.

Mayor Amilbangsa, however, became an absentee official, staying most of the time in Jolo. His police force, though, willingly implemented the policies of the Japanese to the letter, causing the parting of ways between my father and the mayor. My family moved out of Ubol and relocated to Manukmangka Island, 10 miles south, several months later.

Although Sultan Ombra Amilbangsa was not pro-Japanese, his collaboration with the enemy polarized the people of Sulu. Among the members of the local nobility, most of the datus and their followers in Tawi-Tawi kowtowed to the Japanese. A group belonging to the clan of Sultan Jainal Abirin of Taglibi, however, refused to give in to the pressure, and even became actively involved with the resistance movement. This group included Datus Patarasa, Jamalul Abirin, Adjidin Bahjin and Ungas.

Another member of the nobility who refused to cooperate with the Japanese was Datu Tun Mustafa Bin Harun of Cagayan de Sulu. He gained the ire of the Japanese who declared him "wanted" while the pro-Japanese police tracked him down. He was forced to flee to South Ubian where his mother originated, then moved to Sabah, British North Borneo. There he did some intelligence work for the Sulu Area Command, reporting directly to Col. Suarez in Tawi-Tawi. Later he organized a guerilla force of over 100 men to harass enemy troops in Sabah.

### **A First Brush With The Japanese**

My brother Mulo and I had left Jolo a few days before the 24 December invasion. Thus we were spared contact with the Japanese troops. Everything we knew about them, their cruelty and vicious arrogance, the torture, rapes and murders, came by way of letters and eyewitness accounts from kin and friends.

Meanwhile, the Japanese chose Ubol as the seat of the puppet municipal government, following the establishment of a puppet provincial government in Sulu.

In late March 1942, several fully loaded Japanese transport ships, escorted by destroyers and cruisers, steamed through the Bongao Channel close to Simunul Island, in what we surmised was a show of force. This was roundly welcomed by the pro-Japanese supporters in the island. One of the transport ships dropped anchor and landed a company of Japanese marines.

Mayor Amilbangsa was out of town at the time, so his subordinates who were pro-Japanese arrogated upon themselves to offer three of the

mayor's private buildings and the schoolhouse as temporary lodging for the newcomers.

A dozen goats were slaughtered and a sumptuous feast prepared for the "visitors." Little did we know that they did not bring their own food supply for their two-day stay and had to live off the villagers' hospitality. Since none of the natives knew how to speak Japanese, communication was practically limited to sign language. Even the liaison, Datu Alawaddin Bandon, who came with the Japanese from Jolo, was helpless as he, too, could not speak their language.

The villagers were particularly curious about the purpose of such a visit, but nobody could ask a straightforward question. We suspected that the call was merely to draw up more support for the puppet government. If that were the case, their strategy obviously backfired.

Our family was living in a large wooden building that was once a Chinese store. The structure stood a few feet above the sea and connected to dry land by a long wooden footbridge. The bridge branched out into smaller catwalks linked to the other houses.

In the wee hours the next morning, we were rudely awakened by incessant pounding on our door. My father got up to have a look-see, but just as he was opening the door, it wildly swung open by sheer force. Three mean-looking, huge Japanese ganged up on my father, as curses in unintelligible language broke the serenity of the neighborhood. My father's only fault, we deduced later, was that he wasn't "quick enough" to open the door. As fists rained blows on my father's face, our unwanted visitors kept yelling like they were demanding something which none among us could figure out.

My mother, who was awakened by the commotion, saw what was going on and in a sudden fit of anger, yelled at the intruders. Her reaction was understandable, but it also nearly caused her death. One of my father's attackers grabbed the large wooden door bar and mightily swung at her head. She ducked in time and the blow missed her head by a hair's breadth. The Japanese swung at her again but instead hit the edge of the wooden store counter separating them. This further infuriated her attacker. He dashed around the counter to grab her, but she was simply too agile for him and she was able to flee through the door and out of harm's way.

The Japanese gave chase but he lost her on one of the catwalks. Shortly after, he came back, fuming mad. He hied off to the kitchen where

his two companions were still beating my father to a pulp. The commotion also drew me to the kitchen and I finally figured out what they wanted in the first place. They had wanted my father to cook rice for them in an iron pot which we were using to make salt. The Japanese were questioning my father about the sediment that had caked at the bottom of the pot. Too bad such failure to communicate had hurt my father so much.

Gathering courage, I approached the Japanese holding the pot.

"Shio, shio, shio!" I said, pointing to the crust in the pot. I braced myself for a blow, but none came. They looked at me and I saw rage in their eyes. I kept repeating the word "shio" and waited to be hit or flung to the four corners of the house.

Miraculously, they just rushed out of the door, still seething. Apparently, they broke into another house where the same orgy of commotion and curses took place. Then I saw the homeowner, Hadji Butu, a religious leader in the community, running out and bleeding from the mouth.

"Shio," by the way, is the Japanese word for salt. I remembered seeing it in a Japanese primer a few months earlier. This word must have saved my family, particularly my parents and me, from certain tragedy. That day, I learned that Japanese soldiers forced their way into most houses in the village and manhandled the occupants. They demanded rice, pots, pans, and other kitchenware and foodstuff.

"I wish I had a hand grenade," I muttered to myself one morning as I watched a platoon of Japanese Marines march in formation toward Tampakan. I was filled with rage and bitterness and wanted to get even.

### **Assassination of a Japanese Officer**

Back in Jolo town, the savagery inflicted by the invaders upon the civilian populace went on unabated. Mariama Kasiwagi and his brother Asamoto, the Japanese prewar storekeepers, were among the most brutal. Slowly, the atrocities turned the people's resentment into hatred, and hatred became anger.

Demetrio Gaspar was a former classmate and a member of our teenage social organization called "The Comrades." We had as club adviser Mr. Bernardo Mananzan, our English teacher. Metring, as we fondly called Demetrio, was only 16 years old but was quite tall for his age. He felt he had had enough of the invaders' brutalities and took matters into his own hands. He started stalking the movements of the Japanese "verdugos" (executioners).

One evening, as people were coming out of the moviehouse "Cine Independent," he spotted Mariama. Metring casually approached Mariama, pulled out a .45 caliber revolver, and shot the Japanese point blank. Death was instantaneous, and Mariama's head became a fountain of blood.

Metring simply melted with the crowd to elude arrest by Japanese soldiers who were around. He escaped to the wetland of San Raymundo and hid in a friend's house. Pretty soon, he was the most wanted man in Jolo, but the Japanese who were hot on his tracks failed to get him. He was actually hiding in the attic of a house frequented by Japanese officers, along Scott Road, San Raymundo, owned by Col. Delgado who was married to Indah Taas, daughter of Sultan Jainal Abirin.

When the heat on him somewhat eased Metring went to Luuk where he reported to Lt. Agustin Datiles, commander of a group of Philippine Constabulary (PC) soldiers who refused to surrender. Metring, however, did not stay long with the group as he felt that his presence would invite Japanese attacks. He left for the Mindanao mainland and found his way to Davao where he remained incognito. He returned to Sulu in November 1944 to join the Sulu Area Command.

## **Unrest in Sulu**

### **The Fighting 21**

Historically, Sulu was never completely conquered, for the natives successfully resisted all foreign domination. During the Spanish era, Sulu warriors fought the Spanish conquistadores for more than three centuries and retained their freedom. The Japanese occupation was treated no differently. After several months of brutal rule by the invaders, the freedom-loving people of Sulu became restless and began to nurture an incipient defiance. Various armed groups were organized in Siasi and Tawi-Tawi, but they kept a low profile.

The people silently rejoiced over the news that a daring guerrilla unit, led by a young Tausug warrior, Lt. Abdulrahim Imao, landed in Siasi on 25 December 1942. Imao immediately took over the municipal building, disarmed the puppet police force, and openly defied the Japanese Imperial Command in Sulu. Datu Idris Amirhussin, the puppet mayor, narrowly escaped arrest.

Imao's unit consisted of civilian volunteers and Constabulary, Army and Philippine Scout troops who ignored the Japanese call for voluntary surrender. Although the group was actually made up of 23 people, Imao preferred to call it "The Fighting 21" because two of them were boatmen, not combatants.

Before returning to Sulu to organize a guerrilla movement, Lt. Imao used to operate in Curuan, Zamboanga under Capt. Luis Morgan. Left in Curuan to continue their guerrilla activities in this area were Lts. Antonio Belen and Benjamin Buerenger.

The PC squad in Siasi, under Sgt. Baldomero Santos, was the first to join Imao. Soon, Army reserve officers from all over Sulu responded to Imao's call. Among them were Lts. Konglam Teo, Pantaril Tahir, Saberalam Maut, Anton Tan, Jacuddin Saipuddin, Jailani Lakamen and Ismael Ratag. In due time, more PC soldiers, reservists, teacher-trainers and civilian volunteers enlisted with Imao's unit.

Young men from the Island of Sibaud in the Siasi group of islands made up the majority of the first guerrilla company organized in the area. Among the early volunteers

was a female, Emerita, wife of Lt. Saberalam Maut. She had two brothers, Primitivo and Faustino, who also joined the movement. To gain more following, Imao used Col. Alejandro Suarez's name. He also appointed Mr. Miralam Tillah, a former supervising teacher, as acting mayor of Siasi.

Imao learned of the intact PC detachment of thirty men in Bato-Bato, Tawi-Tawi under the command of 1st Lt. Alejandro Trespeces, so he sent two emissaries, Cpl. Abdul Cuadra and Pfc. Fabian Flores, to Bato-Bato to ask Trespeces and his men to report to Siasi. Trespeces, however, ignored Imao's request for two reasons: one, he outranked Imao; and, two, he was still under instruction by Col. Suarez, the overall military commander in Sulu, not to take orders from anyone except him (Suarez).

Cuadra and Flores were even briefly held by Trespeces on suspicion of espionage.

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The Fighting 21 consisted of

- 2nd Lt. Abdulrahim Imao (PC),
  - 1st Sgt. Agustin Datiles (PC),
  - Mayor Kalingalan Caluang (CV),
  - 1st Sgt. Morilla (PC),
  - Sgt. Moro Dugasan (PC),
  - Sgt. Abdulmuin Imao (PA),
  - Sgt. Bonifacio Datiles (PA),
  - Pfc. Bienvenido Yanga (PA),
  - Pfc. Sempick Ansola (PS),
  - Pfc. Tomas Aguaras (PC),
  - Pfc. Figuaras (PC),
  - Pvt. Santiago Lianto (PA),
  - Pvt. Fausto Haas (PA),
  - Pvt. Egmedio Barrera (CV),
  - Pvt. Amado Janoro (CV),
  - Pvt. Salih Malanta (CV),
  - Pvt. Susie Tarac (CV),
  - Pvt. Arellano Lianto (CV),
  - Pvt. Rodolfo Solacito (CV),
  - Pvt. Juanito Acuna (CV), and
  - Pvt. Moises Fernando (CV).
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### **Siasi under Fire**

Four days after the Fighting 21 landed in Siasi, the Japanese attacked the town. Two barges loaded with Japanese troops were involved in the siege. The Japanese shelled the town for two hours, and barraged it with heavy machine gunfire to establish a beachhead. The guerrilla defenders who were effectively entrenched successfully repulsed the attack, suffering only one fatality, Pvt. Rod Espiridion Aguillion. Nonetheless, the victory was reason enough for rejoicing among the Freedom Fighters.

Encouraged by their initial success, Lt. Datiles and a group of men from the original Fighting 21 left for Karundung, Luuk to extend the resistance movement to Jolo island. This group was met with enthusiasm from unit-less soldiers and civilian volunteers alike. Incidentally, Lt. Datiles was familiar with the place, having been head of a PC detachment in the area before the war.

On 9 February 1943, the Japanese launched a stronger attack on Siasi. Two warplanes dropped over a dozen bombs while gunboats heavily shelled the town. Among those hit was the power house at Lapak Agricultural School where the guerrillas charged their radio batteries. Again, guerrillas from well-concealed positions prevented the enemy from landing. This successful second defense put up by the resistance movement gave Siasi the enviable sobriquet "Little Bataan of Sulu."





## Chapter II **The Sulu Guerrilla Movement**

### **Colonel Alejandro Suarez**

**T**he story of the Sulu Area Command of World War II is also the story of its gallant and courageous commander, Col. Alejandro Suarez, O-1174 PC. He was a regular PC officer with vast experience, wisdom, and common sense in dealing with the Muslims of Mindanao.

He took part in numerous major battles and engagements during the pacification campaigns in Lanao, Cotabato and Sulu as an enlisted man, and later as an officer. He also held various positions in the civil government: tax collector in Lanao and Sulu, auxiliary justice of the peace in Lanao, deputy provincial governor of Lanao, deputy provincial governor of Sulu and acting provincial governor of Sulu.

At the outbreak of the Pacific War, he was designated provincial inspector for Sulu and acting governor of the province. The last government official with these dual positions was the American Sulu governor at the turn of the century.

During World War II, through his leadership, organizational ability, tact and gallantry, he succeeded in bringing together for the first time in the history of Sulu the different ethnic groups including the Tausugs, the Samals, as well as the Christians, the Chinese, and even the sea gypsies, to fight a common enemy. Under his able leadership and guidance, jealousy and internal squabbles were practically unknown among his warriors.

His life became legendary. His well-organized command, the well-known fighting spirit of his Sulu warriors, and the vital intelligence information he had sent from his strategic location in southern Philippines to GHQ Australia, caught the attention of no less than Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Col. Suarez was of mixed Christian and Muslim blood. He was born in a Spanish garrison on 14 March 1897 of a Spanish father and a

Maguindanao mother. His maternal grandfather was a Maguindanao warrior and a hadji, one who had gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca. At the turn of the century, when the Spanish forces surrendered to the Americans, his father was among those who were repatriated to Spain. Suarez grew up under the care of an uncle, Herminigildo Suarez, and this was how he got his surname.

After completing his elementary education, he took up correspondence courses while working on the farm. Life was rough then in the frontier-like town of Cotabato. Bands of outlaws were giving the government king-size headaches. Youthful Alejandro — he was only 17 years old at the time — made an adult decision and joined the military service on 9 June 1914. Private Suarez's first assignment was with the 2nd Moro Company.

As an enlisted man, he was involved in numerous encounters against outlaw bands during the pacification campaign in Mindanao. He rose through the ranks, first as lance corporal, corporal, then sergeant. A dedicated soldier who was always mindful of his duties and responsibilities, his American officers encouraged him to take an examination for commission. His height and good looks, and his knowledge of the local dialect, came in handy for his military career.

Suarez hurdled the stiff examinations and on 15 March 1920, he was commissioned as 3rd lieutenant and assigned as detachment commander at Pata island, Jolo, before being transferred later to Wao, Lanao. After three years, he was promoted to 2nd lieutenant. Seeing the potential of the native officer, his supervisors, Col. Olec Waloe and Maj. Noe C. Killian, prodded him to take up special military courses in the United States.

He enrolled at the University of Michigan in 1926. A markedly different young officer came home a year later—he became more confident and efficient. He was promoted shortly to 1st lieutenant and transferred to the Sulu archipelago as commanding officer of the 125th PC Co. based at Asturias, Jolo.

For the next 10 years, he handled sensitive posts as commanding officer of risky stations such as the 112th PC Co. at Camp Romandier; 113th PC Co. at Camp Andres and 118th PC Co. at Taglibi, all in Jolo. These stations were hot spots. He personally led operations against outlaws, sharpened his battle skills and armed himself with acumen in dealing with the belligerent Tausugs of Sulu.

Suarez received his captain's bar after his Jolo island assignments and was transferred to a relatively peaceful island, Siasi, 35 nautical miles south of Jolo. The main town was a business center controlled by Chinese Filipinos.

Suarez encountered a different type of problem in Siasi. With more time to socialize rather than go after outlaws, he fell in love with a beautiful, soft-spoken Chinese mestiza, Dimtoy Tan. Despite his rank and good physical attributes, it took him a year of courtship before he finally won the damsel's nod. They got married on 25 August 1938 before the justice of the peace in Siasi.

Dimtoy Tan proved to be a very intelligent lady and became a great asset to her husband's endeavors. Her knowledge of the psychology, even the idiosyncrasies, of the Muslims was invaluable as her husband rose in stature to tackle bigger responsibilities.

While Suarez was serving as Siasi detachment commander, two unforgettable events marked his life. One was when he accompanied Mr. Edward Kuder, superintendent of schools for Sulu during the latter's round of the islands. In Tabawan, the American nearly lost his life at the hands of a juramentado (amok). Suarez killed the would-be assailant and saved Kuder. The second was when he was given the special assignment of solving the murder of Sulu Governor Fugate, also an American. Disguised as an American miner and assisted by PC enlisted men and a local policeman, Suarez worked on the case and successfully solved the crime.

In 1939, Suarez was transferred to Antique as provincial inspector, and two years later, to Cagayan province where he was promoted to major on 29 September 1941. With war clouds hovering over the Pacific, President Manuel L. Quezon reassigned Suarez to Sulu and appointed him provincial inspector and acting governor.

When the Japanese invaded Jolo on 24 December 1941, Major Suarez led his small armed force in defending the island against advancing enemy units at Kaunayan Beach, Patikul. In the encounter, Suarez caught a bayonet thrust in the left forearm during hand-to-hand fighting. His force was almost wiped out. About 20,000 Japanese troops landed, occupied Jolo and used it as a staging area for the invasion of British North Borneo. Meanwhile, Suarez ordered his men to break up but not to surrender. He told them to hold on to their firearms and revealed to them his plan to proceed to Zamboanga and report to Gen. Fort. He

also promised them that he would return as soon as possible. But it took him quite a long time to fulfill that promise.

On his way to Zamboanga, he made a side trip to visit his troops in Siasi and in Tawi-Tawi. He likewise advised them against surrendering and told them to lie low and keep their guns. Upon reaching Zamboanga, he immediately reported for duty and was assigned to the 81st Infantry Division. He was promoted to lieutenant colonel on 1 May 1942 by Gen. Fort.

The Japanese invasion of Mindanao was imminent. With the fall of Bataan and Corregidor and Gen. Wainwright's surrender, however, Fort's Mindanao forces were also ordered to surrender. Suarez made known his desire to return to Sulu and rejoin his men who were waiting for him. His superiors prevailed upon him to obey orders and join the general surrender. As a good soldier he obeyed and became a prisoner-of-war (POW) when Fort surrendered on 19 May 1942.

While Suarez was at the concentration camp, high-ranking Japanese officers and puppet government officials offered him lucrative government positions. Feigning illness, he turned down the offers. Meanwhile, he was planning his escape. On 21 January 1943, Suarez made a successful dash to freedom and fled towards Sulu aboard a sleek kumpit acquired through the help of Sulu businessman Sabtal Usman. That night, the boat caught good wind and they reached Bato-Bato in Tawi-Tawi after a few days' travel, mostly done at night.

The historic escape was heralded all over Sulu and brought much rejoicing and hope among the people. Suarez immediately organized a guerrilla force using the still intact PC detachment in Tawi-Tawi as the core of the organization. He ordered Lt. Imao of the famed Fighting 21 to report directly to him.

### **Suarez's Official Command**

Lt. Col. Alejandro Suarez issued General Order No. 1 to assume command of the Sulu guerrilla forces on 10 February 1943. The Sulu guerrilla organization was subsequently designated the 125th Infantry Regiment by Col. Wendell W. Fertig, C.E., commanding officer of the 10th Military District, Mindanao.

The territorial jurisdiction of the 125th Inf. Reg., later known as the Sulu Area Command, encompassed the whole Sulu archipelago. Col. Suarez divided Sulu into four defense sectors for tactical and administrative purposes:

Sector	Headquarters	Districts	Commander
		Bongao, Tandubas, Balimbing,	
1. Tawi-Tawi	Bato-Bato, Tawi-Tawi	Simunul, South Ubian, Sitangkai, Cayagan de Sulu	1st Lt. Alejandro Trespoces (PC)
2. Siasi	Siasi	Siasi, Tapul, Pangutaran	2nd Lt. Konglan Teo
3. Eastern Sector	Panamao, Jolo	Tongkil, Pata, Luuk, Panamao, Talipao, Taglibi,	2nd Lt. Agustin Datiles
4. Western Sector	Silangkan, Jolo	Indanan, Parang, Marungas, Jolo town	2nd Lt. Abdulrahim Imao

One rifle battalion was designated to each sector, but due to the lack of firearms the garrisons were manned only by skeletal forces. There was actually only a lean rifle company each in Tawi-Tawi and Siasi, 40 men in the eastern sector, and 30 men in the western sector. Most of the men were Constabulary and Army soldiers, reservists and some civilian volunteers. They were armed with Springfield rifles, shotguns, revolvers, and homemade guns called *paltik*, spears, kris, and barong.

With his guerrilla organization established and the guerrilla forces set in place, Col. Suarez started organizing the civil government. He and his appointed deputy governor, Sheik Yasin Bagis, traveled to the different islands in Sulu and appointed mayors and vice mayors in different municipalities from among local leaders loyal to the Commonwealth government. They, in turn, appointed other municipal officials.

To assist the local municipal governments and the guerrilla movement, a paramilitary organization called the Bolo Battalion was organized in each municipality.

The guerrilla movement, backed by local government organizations, stymied the puppet Japanese government officials' activities and contained the acts of outlaws and pirates against civilians.

Food supplies for the guerrilla forces from the different neighboring islands were thus assured and the loyalty of most of the civilian population was enhanced. Fortunately, during this period of organization of the civil government, the number of enemy troops in Sulu had decreased considerably. Col. Suarez took advantage of the lull to intensify training of the guerrilla troops and visit officials of outlying towns.

With the guerrilla civil government in place, the underground movement was assured of most of the civilian population's support. Local paper money was issued, and acceptance was no problem, in guerrilla-controlled territories.

There was a constant flow of food supplies to Bato-Bato. Among the most active suppliers of foodstuffs were Panglima Ahang Assang of Maraning in western Tawi-Tawi, and Mr. Ladja Indanan of Banaran island in eastern Tawi-Tawi. They were also able to get the Badjao (sea gypsies) communities under the leadership of Mr. Heneral to support the guerrillas with supplies of fish and other sea products.

Guidelines to adopt a standard and uniform method of controls of donated, requisitioned, and commandeered supplies in log books were issued, and battalion commanders and accountable officers were ordered to keep proper records. All disbursements had to be properly vouchered and recorded in cash books that were kept by the regimental finance officer and audited by the regimental auditor. When Liberation came in 1945, GHQ Australia representatives were impressed with the Sulu Area Command financial records.

Good accounting records were credited to Capt. Engracio Guligado, regimental finance officer, and his assistant, Lt. Thomas Oliveros. Lt. George Little of the U.S. Army Claims Office, who went to Jolo during the liberation to check on the claims against the Sulu Area Command, had little difficulty in obtaining the desired information. A certain Maj. Gray of the U.S. Army was likewise pleasantly amazed at the minimal expenses incurred by the command made up of three rifle regiments, in comparison with other guerrilla units of the same size in other areas.

During the early period of the organization of the 125th Infantry Regiment, Lt. Reed C. Chamberlain, USMC (United States Marine Corps), arrived at Siasi and joined the guerrillas. Seeing the need for firearms, he volunteered to lead a patrol to Tambiasan, British North Borneo, and raided an isolated Japanese garrison for firearms, ammunition and other supplies. Chamberlain's "marauders" with Lt. Simpeck

Ansola as second in command, staged a surprise attack on their objective and achieved significant success. The patrol brought back over two dozen guns with ammunition.

Intelligence operations (S-2) were also assigned by Col. Suarez to gather intelligence information in British North Borneo and Dutch East Indies, particularly the Celebes. These intelligence agents disguised themselves as traders. To operate successfully, each was armed with a guerrilla pass as well as a Japanese pass. They were able to gather valuable information. (How some of them were able to effect the escape of Australian officers and men from Berhala concentration camp near Sandakan, British North Borneo, and eventually join the Sulu guerrilla organization will be discussed later in this book.)

On 7 March 1943, strong Japanese forces attacked Bongao and Bato-Bato in the Tawi-Tawi sector, which were controlled by guerrilla forces. The guerrillas initially did not put up a fight, and instead allowed the enemy to land. Then they waited, ready to ambush at the towns' outskirts, but to no avail. The Japanese did not fall for the guerrillas' strategy. Instead, they looted the Chinese stores and civilian homes, then razed the towns to deprive the fledgling underground movement of its bases of operation.

The invaders then proceeded to Siasi the following day and attacked the "Little Bataan of Sulu" for the third time. It was a combined assault operation by sea, land and air, consisting of some 500 men using five armored assault barges, four launchers, and two bombers. After spending hundreds of shells, followed by strafing and bombings of suspected guerrilla positions on the beaches, the enemy effected simultaneous landings at Siundo shore and at the coastal town of Siasi.

The small guerrilla force abandoned their defense positions at the shorelines and the town proper but waited in ambush at peripheral roads at the outskirts. Once again, enemy forces looted and burned the town. While the Japanese were busy torching the buildings, guerrilla combat patrols and snipers under Lt. Simpeck Ansola and Sgt. Sabtal Salahuddin were dispatched to harass the enemy, killing 7 of them. In the attack on Siasi, 3 guerrillas and 37 civilians were killed.

With the burning of Bato-Bato, Bongao and Siasi, the enemy assumed that the Sulu patriots were discouraged. In truth, they were enraged, and more determined to fight the enemy to the very end.

**Efforts to Procure Firearms**

Reports from guerrilla intelligence agents in July 1943 revealed that firearms and financial help might be available from organized Chinese patriots in Borneo. Col. Suarez dispatched Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang and three men to contact the Chinese group under the leadership of Dr. Elbert L.N. Kowk based in Jesselton, British North Borneo. Disguised as barter traders, Lts. Kaluang and Moro Ragasan, Sgt. Imam Marjukin and Pvt. Gurabi Hanub left for Borneo.

A month later, the group returned, bringing with them Dr. Kwok and \$10,000 in British North Borneo currency, clothing, quinine and other supplies. Dr. Kwok was inducted into the Sulu guerrilla organization and commissioned as 3rd Lieutenant by Col. Suarez. This commission was later confirmed by Col. Fertig. Dr. Kwok underwent intensive guerrilla training for two months before returning to Borneo to actively lead his group against Japanese forces in his area.

A few weeks after Dr. Kwok's departure, reports reaching Bato-Bato indicated that his guerrilla forces attacked the Japanese garrison in Jesselton, capturing the town and killing most of the enemy. He anticipated a strong counterattack and set fire to enemy warehouses, a radio station and other installations of military significance. But their control of the town was shortlived. As expected, Japanese reinforcements arrived, and the Chinese resistance fighters sustained heavy casualties and were forced to withdraw. Dr. Kwok was captured but his second-in-command, Mr. Lim King Fat, eluded arrest and escaped to Tawi-Tawi. He asked for military assistance, but the Sulu guerrillas were in no position to help because only a few weeks earlier they, too, had been subjected to heavy enemy assault. During that attack, Bato-Bato, the guerrilla home base, was razed to the ground for the second time. Failing to get military assistance, Fat returned to Borneo, accompanied by Sgt. Imam Marjukin and four other guerrillas. While in Borneo, the five Filipinos fought alongside the Chinese guerrillas before returning to Tawi-Tawi.

**Consolidation of Guerrilla Forces in Tawi-Tawi**

The frequent Japanese attacks against the guerrillas in Luuk, Jolo and Siasi forced Col. Suarez to withdraw and consolidate his units in Tawi-Tawi. The island was relatively safer as it was farther from the enemy concentration in Jolo, and had thick forest cover and a rugged terrain, both ideal for guerrilla warfare. The people in smaller islands sur-



rounding Tawi-Tawi were also friendly and supportive of the resistance movement. Geographically, though, Tawi-Tawi was not large enough to withstand heavy, sustained military pressure.

Food for the guerrilla fighters was scarce. To make matters worse, the dense forests were breeding grounds for the malaria-carrying anophles mosquitoes. Practically every guerrilla contracted this dangerous disease. Many succumbed, with initial casualties being those hit by the falcifarum or cerebral variety which, without medicines, was almost always fatal.

### **Finally a Guerrilla**

Against the backdrop of brutalities and savagery committed by the Japanese occupation forces, on one hand, and the electrifying news that a guerrilla movement had started in the hills, large segments of the civilian population were galvanized into joining the resistance. At that time, my family had just moved from Ubol, the seat of the puppet government in Tawi-Tawi, to the island of Manukmangka, 10 miles south. Habib Tajalla and Hatib Sarail, family friends, were kind enough to offer us a piece of land for farming.

War is the breeding ground for personal glory and heroism and I, still not out of my teens, silently nurtured a plan to join the Freedom Fighters. My problem, though, was how to tell my parents about it. Telling them was one thing, getting their blessing was another.

The farm, which was planted with sweet potatoes, tapioca and corn, was not yet ready for harvest, and I felt guilty just entertaining the thought of leaving my family. I had three brothers and five sisters. I was the second to the eldest. But I surmised that my brother Mulo was there to help my father with the farm in my absence. Every day brought me closer to the realization of my dream.

One morning I was about ready to ask for my parents' permission, but I saw my mother crying. Mulo, I found out, had not returned the night before. We were later informed that he had left for the hills in Tawi-Tawi to join the guerrilla movement. He had gone without even telling my parents.

I felt awfully sad about his departure, but I was more disappointed because he had pre-empted my own plan. "He had one over me again,"

I muttered to myself, "the way he has always done before." Mulo always did, be it in academic competition, athletics or romantic pursuits.

Although I kept my feelings to myself, the urge to join the guerrillas returned after a few days and with greater intensity. A month after my brother left, I had gathered enough courage to ask for my parents' permission and blessing. I knew that the odds were not in my favor with Mulo already up in the hills.

Early in July 1943, I revealed my intentions to my parents. They tried very hard to dissuade me, or at least postpone my plan. My insistence brought tears to my mother's eyes. Deep in my heart, I knew that although they wished I would reconsider, I had their blessing.

Quietly, I prepared for my departure. It was 7 July when I took a sailboat for Bato-Bato. My parents, sisters and brothers sadly watched me depart. Our sail caught good wind and we reached our destination after a day's trip.

Early next morning, I went directly to the school building that served as guerrilla headquarters. There was a long queue ahead of me. When my turn for the interview came, the interviewer was surprisingly kind to me. Then I was brought before the acting battalion commander, 1st Lt. Julio Valencia, to take my oath. I was excited as I raised my right hand and read aloud,

I, Ernesto M. Espaldon, a citizen of the Philippines, 18 years of age and residing in Manukmangka, Sulu, Philippines, do hereby acknowledge to have been enlisted this 8th day of July 1943 at Bato-Bato, Sulu for service to the Militia Force of Bato-Bato, Sulu, and do hereby swear that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the Commonwealth of the Philippines; that I will serve it honestly and faithfully against all enemies whosoever, and obey orders of the officers appointed over me; and I hereby further swear that I recognize the supreme authority of the United States of America in the Philippines; and I will maintain true faith and allegiance thereto; and that I impose this obligation upon myself voluntarily without mental reservation or purpose of evasion. SO HELP ME GOD.

Of course, I lied about my age. I was only 16, but my heart was bursting with pride. I could hardly believe I was finally a genuine guerrilla.

"How are your parents?" I heard somebody ask. It was Lt. Valencia trying to make me feel at ease.

"They are fine, sir," I answered, still astonished.

"I am a Bicolano and they are both my provincemates," Valencia continued. He was a kind man indeed.

"I cannot issue you any firearm now. They are only for experienced soldiers and for those on special assignments. I am hoping we can capture more firearms from isolated Japanese outposts so that we could issue you one. Do you know how to use a typewriter?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir."

"I am assigning you to "A" Co. as company clerk. Report to Sgt. Luis Flores for instructions. He is presently acting company clerk and waiting for a replacement." Lt. Valencia called Sgt. Flores in and ordered him to further explain my duties. Flores was expecting a commission and was happy to see me relieve him.

I found out from him that Lt. Valencia was a 1st Sergeant in prewar years and that he participated in numerous military campaigns against outlaws in Cotabato and Lanao provinces. He had a good track record as a Constabulary soldier.

On the day I arrived at Bato-Bato to enlist, a kumpit loaded with over 50 young recruits was also docking at the wharf. They were from the islands of Sitangkai and Sibutu, farther down south. They were recruited by Lt. Simpeck Ansola, who was to be their commanding officer in "B" Co., 1st Battalion. A former enlisted man of the Philippine Scouts, Ansola was a tough and aggressive officer. He was visibly happy to get enthusiastic, young volunteers for his company.

### **Eight Australians as New Comrades-In-Arms**

Shortly before my enlistment, our intelligence agent, Cpl. Abdul Cuadra, who was operating in Sandakan, British North Borneo, aided in the escape of four Australian officers and four enlisted men from a concentration camp in Berhala Island near Sandakan. Cuadra had been working on the scheme for several weeks.

The Australians were former members of the Australia 8th Army Division assigned to defend Singapore. They saw little action because Singapore, dubbed as the Gibraltar of the Far East and expected to withstand a siege of six months, fell after only two weeks of attack by Japanese forces under Lt. Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita in February 1942.

Members of our guerrilla detachment at Tarawakan on the western side of Tawi-Tawi were so elated to see Cpl. Cuadra and the five Australians arrive in another kumplit that we carried Cuadra and the Australians ashore on our shoulders. After welcoming amenities, the group was guided through secret trails to a hut at Km. 6. There, the three Australians who had arrived earlier had a happy reunion with the new arrivals.

After a brief respite, they were brought to meet Col. Suarez at his jungle headquarters. They were very much impressed with the Colonel's kind and fatherly attitude, and felt at home in no time. *Tuba*, a native liquor made of fermented coconut sap, was served. After exchanging more information and pleasantries, the visitors were escorted to their quarters in Bato-Bato town, 6 kilometers away.

Col. Suarez planned to use the Australians's expertise in training the members of our organization. He called the two most senior Australian officers for consultations. He issued special orders for these appointments:

The Australians were grateful for their freedom, and this they freely expressed to their guerrilla comrades-in-arms. They were also proud of their new assignments. Bato-Bato soon became a beehive of military activities, and morale in the guerrilla camp soared to new heights. Although they had little or no combat experience, the Australians's military expertise in training and organization were very much needed. Col Suarez frequently came down from his jungle headquarters to confer with Capt. Steele and to observe the intensified training of recruits.

Saturdays and Sundays were market days and people from the different islands came. Of course, they saw the Australians with the guerrillas and the news filtered to the Japanese command in Jolo: "Australians are training the guerrillas in jungle warfare at Bato-Bato."

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- Capt. R.E. Steele, AIF-asst. executive officer and regimental training officer
  - 1st Lt. Rex Blow, AIF-CO, 1st Battalion, 125th Inf. Regiment
  - 1st Lt. Charles Wagner, AIF-regimental intelligence officer
  - 1st Lt. Leslie Gillon, AIF-executive officer, 1st Battalion
  - Sgt. Maj. Walter Wallace, AIF-chief regimental instructor
  - Pvts. James Kenney, Rex Butler and Jack McLaren-assistant instructors
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One of Lt. Blow's first actions as battalion commander was to ask for a battalion clerk. I was fortunate enough to be the only one available at the time and was subsequently transferred from "A" Co. to battalion headquarters. I was assigned directly under Lt. Blow.

There was little paper work. His first concern was getting a network of secret jungle trails and food supply storage huts in the jungle. At first we did these together, but soon I was in charge of these projects. I arranged for Pmts. Tianso Quana and Pascual Lapasaran to be assigned on special duty with me.

Additional responsibilities fell on my shoulders. As battalion clerk, I served as Lt. Blow's bodyguard, confidant, and guide.

I also served as interpreter. Australian English was difficult to understand. To effectively communicate with the troops, it was necessary for me to translate Blow's statements or orders to Filipino-English or to Samal or Tausug dialects. Although I thought I was doing a commendable job as an interpreter, there was much I had to learn.

I was shocked when one morning, after greeting me, Lt. Blow asked nonchalantly, "Where are you going to die?" It may have been a joke, but I thought it was in poor taste. Yet, who was I to complain? I was only a battalion clerk. On another occasion during our patrol to the outlying Island of Simunul, I heard him ask, "What is the name of the place where we are going to die?" It took some time before I realized that what he actually said was, "What is the name of the place where we are going today?"

My special assignment with the battalion commander warranted the issuance of a firearm and I was provided with a Springfield rifle. This made me proud and happy.

When we were invited to a social function on the islands such as a Muslim wedding, the host would usually request for gunfire to herald the special occasion. Lt. Blow would normally oblige.

During a wedding in Tubig Indangan village, Blow ordered me to fire one shot. I aimed at a lone coconut in the tallest tree 200 meters away. With all eyes on me, I took careful aim and slowly squeezed the trigger. The coconut fell. This was followed by "ahs" and "ohs" from the crowd.

My little show shot raised Lt. Blow's prestige and became a conversation piece. "Lt. Blow's bodyguard is a sharpshooter," the people would say. What they didn't know was that my father had a cal. .22 rifle before

the war and we went hunting together many times. Those hunting trips made me a good shot.

First Lt. Wagner handpicked officers and men in his intelligence unit. He was aggressive and demanding. Among those assigned to him were Lts. Padjawa Itum and Julhari Sapal. The noncommissioned officers he chose were Sgt. Mahonton Itum, Cpls. Romulo Espaldon and Juan Balisi, Pfc. Maheya Naduha and Taotao Sali and Pvts. Mararun Tajalla, Salatan Abdulrahman and Hulala Bakong.

In discharging his duties, Wagner made some serious mistakes. The "pro-Japanese" issue had become an obsession with him. He ordered the liquidation of some civilian leaders just because they were reported to be pro-Japanese. Some of these just naively supported the puppet governor who was their political leader, although they were not necessarily pro-Japanese. Wagner failed to familiarize himself with the politics and the culture of the people. Some were wrongfully accused of collaborating with the enemy and were severely punished or summarily executed without proper investigation.

Fortunately, some of the men were familiar with the local customs and traditions, and also knew that many of those wrongly accused of being pro-Japanese were innocent. Some of the men assigned to the intelligence unit ignored some of Wagner's orders, with the excuse that the prisoner had escaped or that the suspect could not be located.

While Sgts. Butler, Kennedy, and McLaren were busy drilling the troops, Sgt. Maj. Wallace organized the Signal Corps. He picked teachers and high school students as the first batch of men in his unit. Among them were Sgt. Fausto Bernardino, Cpls. Bensick Lim, Suraide Reyes, Yusop Kalbit, Loreto Tabayo, Pfc. Hilarion Medina.

This group became the nucleus of an efficient signal corps that relayed intelligence information on enemy shipping and aircraft movements for GHQ Australia. They contributed in no small measure to the sinking of hundreds of thousands of enemy shipping tonnage. In addition, Japanese transport ships loaded with troops on their way to the fighting zone in the southwest Pacific area became easy prey of American submarines lurking in the deep.

The main lookout station for the Signal Corps was Thumb Hill, 6 kilometers away from Bato-Bato and about 700 feet above sea level. This elevated area stuck like a thumb above the low mountain ranges nearby.

It stood isolated, offering a panoramic view of the ocean and the land mass for miles.

The intelligence information obtained by the Signal Corps was relayed by semaphore to our headquarters in Bato-Bato. It was sorted out, then sent by a runner to the secret radio station, manned by Capt. Frank Young of the U.S. Intelligence Bureau, who in turn radioed it to GHQ Australia.

### **Capt. Frank Young**

The radio station in Tawi-Tawi that relayed our intelligence report to GHQ Australia was headed by Capt. Frank Young, an American mestizo born in Jolo, Sulu. His mother was Tausug. Young joined the USAFFE at the outbreak of the war and fought in Bataan. After the fall of Bataan in March 1942, he was among those taken prisoner. He survived the Death March. From the prisoner of war (POW) camp in Capas, Tarlac, he escaped in July 1942 and managed to reach Panay in the Visayas where he saw a kumpit manned by six Moro traders. Being fluent in the Tausug language and working on the traders' patriotism, he persuaded them to take him to Australia. A German civilian, Albert Kustadt, joined him.

Sailing southeastward, they crossed the Celebes Sea and the Moluccas Passage then proceeded due south. They reached the Australian coast of Arnheim Land after 149 days.

In Australia, Young was interrogated by the U.S. Army Intelligence Section. He was debriefed for information about the enemy, the puppet government and the guerrilla movement. Among those who interrogated him was Col. Jesus Villamor, the great Filipino ace of World War II who was then with the intelligence section.

After the interview, Young underwent intensive training in intelligence work and radio operation. After three months, he passed the rigorous training with flying colors and was sent by submarine for assignment in the Philippines.

Young's first job was to establish a secret radio station in Tawi-Tawi. His knowledge of the customs, culture and dialects of the people came in handy for his new responsibilities. As soon as he reached Tawi-Tawi, he reported to our guerrilla headquarters for proper coordination and logistical support.

On 17 July 1943, two other American radio operators, Capt. J. Hamner and Lt. Kane, also arrived by submarine. There was great rejoicing among those of us who learned of their arrival. I was with Lt. Blow and was among the first to meet them. I knew we were no longer isolated.

The visitors brought complete paraphernalia for their radio and intelligence work and positioned themselves in secret locations known only to a select few.

At the time, orders given from GHQ Australia were for the Sulu guerrillas to concentrate on gathering intelligence information about the enemy and to avoid combat. However, because of our strategic location, the Japanese forces made frequent attacks on our positions.

### **The Strattan Odyssey**

Early in May 1943, Lt. George Davis, USMC, landed in Tawi-Tawi. Davis had escaped through Palawan and Cagayan de Sulu and brought information about the Japanese puppet government in Cagayan de Sulu headed by Mayor Salip Atari. Davis revealed that Atari's police force had arms, ammunition and supplies that the guerrillas could use.

A patrol to capture Atari and confiscate the firearms of his police was subsequently organized by Capt. Guy Strattan. Strattan was familiar with Cagayan de Sulu, having been vice-governor of Sulu before the war. He chose for his second in command 3rd Lt. Jumaadil Aral, a native of Simunul and a townmate of Mrs. Aliah Strattan. Among those handpicked for the mission were Sgt. Luis Frayna; his son, Pvt. Dionggoy Frayna; Cpls. Roque Flores, Loreto Tabayo and four other seasoned soldiers. Also joining the group were Capt. Strattan's brother-in-law, Sgt. Addak Asmad, and Strattan's 16-year-old son, Washington.

Capt. Strattan was in his early sixties and had failing eyesight. For these reasons, Mrs. Strattan insisted that her son and brother join her husband in this dangerous mission.

The Strattan group left aboard a kumpit in early May 1943, arriving in Cagayan de Sulu three days later. They barely missed capturing Salip Atari. The wily mayor had managed to escape to Sandakan and reported to the Japanese commander the presence of guerrillas in Cagayan de Sulu. A barge full of 60 Japanese marines was immediately dispatched to intercept and destroy Strattan and his men.



Outnumbered and outgunned, the guerrillas were routed when the Japanese arrived the following day. In the skirmishes, Sgt. Frayna and three of his men lost contact with Capt. Strattan and his group of eight. The enemy relentlessly pursued the latter group and cornered them on top of a hill, with little chance of escape. Darkness veiled the sun. The enemy stopped their pursuit, but maintained their cordon on the hill.

Trapped on the hilltop, Lt. Aral suggested to the younger Strattan what seemed to be the only chance for escape for most of them. Aral proposed that Washington and his uncle Addak join the rest of the group and make a run through the enemy cordon under cover of darkness, but Capt. Strattan would have to be left behind.

Jumaadil explained that sacrificing Capt. Strattan, who was greatly handicapped because of his age, failing eyesight and swollen knees, might save the lives of most of the other members. The younger Strattan thanked Aral for his candid suggestion, but tearfully said he could not accept the proposal. He would stick it out with his father. Addak also decided to stay with his young nephew even if he, too, believed that nothing short of a miracle could extricate them from their hopeless predicament.

As twilight turned to darkness, Lt. Aral and his men decided to separate from Capt. Strattan's group and make a go for it through the enemy line. Sensing the escape attempt, the Japanese troops pursued the fleeing guerrillas with machine gun and mortar fire. Exploding mortar shells tailed Aral and his men. Two did not make it. But darkness was on Aral's side. And their escape may have saved the lives of Capt. Strattan, his son and his brother-in-law, for the enemy seemed to have thought that it was the entire group of guerrillas which was on the run.

After the smoke and din of battle had cleared, the older Strattan was dragged by his son and brother-in-law inch by inch away from the hill. Miraculously, they were undetected. Sgt. Asmad, who was muscular and strong, carried the older Strattan piggyback as they retreated northward through the jungle that night.

By dawn, they reached a small village by the shore. They learned of friendly civilians departing by kumpit for Boan Island 3 miles away. They asked to join the group and were accommodated. On reaching the island, luck was again on their side because Datu Amilbangsa of Boan Island, who was also wanted by the Japanese, was boarding his kumpit with his family to escape to Palawan about 150 miles west. Amilbangsa was more than glad to help the guerrillas.

They reached Brooke's Point in southern Palawan in two days. Strattan and his group were welcomed by Datu Julkipli, a Muslim leader. He offered to hide them on his farm. They stayed with the good datu for about a month. Then after thanking their host, Strattan asked for permission to leave for Balabac island farther south to prepare for their return to Tawi-Tawi. Reaching Balabac, they were kindly received by the Sansom family, who were loggers. There they lived for another month.

Meanwhile, Aral and his men returned safely to Bato-Bato. Sgt. Frayna and his group followed shortly. The stories they narrated about their encounters with the enemy brought much grief and distress to Capt. Strattan's family and friends. Aral recounted that his last contact with Capt. Strattan was when the latter, his son, and brother-in-law were cornered at the top of a hill with seemingly no chance of escape.\*

Hopeless as it seemed, Mrs. Strattan refused to accept that her husband, son and brother had been all killed. She asked her father, Maharaja Asmad, to organize a search party to Palawan. Asmad also remained hopeful and rightly surmised that Strattan's group could be in southern Palawan.

With some friends and relatives, the search party set sail and arrived in Palawan after a few days. The swift current, however, drifted them first to Balabac island south of Palawan. By nightfall, their kumpit was in the shallow waters of Balabac. The next morning, while cruising along the coast, they decided to inquire from fishermen they saw casting lines along the shore. As they approached, one of the fishermen was surprised to hear his name called. It was Maharaja Asmad who called, as he recognized his son Addak. A tearful but joyous reunion followed.

After replenishing their food and water supplies, the group sailed southward in the general direction of Sandakan at the northern tip of Borneo. Their kumpit hugged the northern coast of Borneo up to the western tip of Sandakan Bay.

Meanwhile, Japanese patrols were combing the area in search of Capt. Steele's group which had just escaped from the concentration camp on Berhala Island.

To avoid suspicion, Asmad took the risk of crossing the bay in broad daylight. Hardly had their kumpit reached the middle of the bay when

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\* Aral was recommended for court martial, but was pardoned when Capt. Strattan and party returned safely some weeks later.


they saw a Japanese armed barge headed in their direction. Capt. Strattan and his son had themselves rolled up in mats to avoid detection. Addak braced himself for any eventuality with a lighted cigar and a homemade can of dynamite to blow up the enemy vessel should the Japanese board their boat.

Fortunately, the patrol made only a brief inspection. Seeing no Caucasian on board, the Japanese officer ordered them to move on. As they approached the eastern side of the bay, stronger winds pushed them faster and they reached Tawi-Tawi in two days. Their return was reason enough for much jubilation in both the guerrilla camp and the Strattan household.

At the time, my brother Mulo and I were staying with the Strattan family since we had no accommodations in the crowded guerrilla barracks. We shared the family's happiness and thanksgiving. Years before the war Mrs. Strattan and my parents were coteachers in Tubig Indangan School on Simunul Island, where I was born. This relationship became even closer during our guerrilla days.



## Chapter III **Guerrillas' Courage under Fire**

 n 1 August 1943, Thumb Hill Signal Station reported a Japanese submarine chaser docked at Bongao wharf 12 miles away. Troops were disembarking from the vessel. Our Australian visitors, having failed to see action in Singapore, and having suffered the indignities in a POW concentration camp, were itching for a fight.

Without any clearance from Col. Suarez, Lt. Wagner formed a small patrol of eight crack guerrilla soldiers to attack the war vessel. With Sgt. Luis Frayna as second-in-command, the group moved out under cover of darkness for Bongao Island. They marched through the forest towards the wharf. They positioned themselves behind the ruins of an old Spanish fort, 100 yards away from the Japanese seacraft.

As the Japanese were doing their predawn exercises, the guerrillas opened fire with BARs (browning automatic rifles), thompson submachine guns (TSMGs) and Springfield rifles sowing blood and death on the deck. The firing continued for several more minutes before the enemy was able to respond with machine-gunfire and shelling from their deck gun.

The Japanese started the vessel engine hurriedly and succeeded in moving out, still under a hail of fire from the attackers. The vessel careened and the firing was directed at its rudder, but it still managed to escape. The ambushers hastily withdrew as the eastern sky began to light up.

Soon Japanese reinforcements arrived from the Bongao garrison nearby, but the guerrillas had already left.

The nascent Sulu guerrilla force based in Bato-Bato had always assumed a low profile, hence it was considered just a nuisance by the enemy. But with the early morning ambush, the enemy's wrath was aroused. Reprisals were expected sooner or later.

Indeed, retribution came sooner. At 7:30 a.m. the next day, 2 August, there was a distant drone of airplanes, followed by a peculiar whin-

ing and loud blasts that filled the air. The target was the schoolhouse used by the guerrillas as headquarters and barracks, and the guerrilla canteen by the roadside about 200 yards away.

Mulo and I rushed out with the other occupants of Strattan's one-story house. I scampered for cover behind a coconut tree only to find two persons already there. I moved over to another tree but it did not offer much protection. With their bombs expended, the two airplanes started strafing from treetop level.

I flung myself through the air and crashed onto the backs of people behind a large rock. Soon, several more kept us company. The engine drones of the planes flying low were deafening. It had only been a couple of weeks since I joined the guerrilla movement and this was my baptism of fire. I was terrified.

We must have been clearly visible from the air because bullets kicked the ground all around us. One hour of strafing felt like ages. Then, as suddenly as they appeared, the airplanes were gone.

As we stood up, I noticed that almost everybody was dazed and shocked or terrified. I was shaking like a leaf. We trooped back to our barracks a few hundred yards away and saw that the building had sustained direct hits. There were also craters around it, all caused by bombs.

On the ground were the lifeless and mangled bodies of four comrades, namely: Sgt. Vincente Valdez (PC), Cpl. Runsa Wadjad (PC), Pvt. Vicente Liksay (CV) and Pvt. Jarinal Amil (PA). Two more lay close by with serious shrapnel wounds, bleeding profusely. They were moaning in pain and no one was around to provide medical help. They both died two hours later. Cpl. Wadjad was clutching the Filipino and American flags in his arms when he died. Apparently, he had hurriedly lowered them from the flagpole during the raid to protect them from destruction.

I was still quivering when I saw Cpl. Wadjad's son, Pvt. Jumah Wadjad, kneeling by his father's side. I pressed his hand in a mute gesture of sympathy. We felt so helpless against an enemy we could not fight. It was unfair. Most of us did not even have any firearm. Fear and frustration engulfed us.

However, upon seeing the macerated bodies of our comrades and hearing the moans of those in pain from their shrapnel wounds, our fears turned to anger. The will to persevere and to avenge their deaths became an obsession among us. Our faith in ourselves and in our cause sustained us.

After the bombing raid, Col. Suarez decided to disband the group of new recruits from Sibutu and Sitangkai since there were no firearms forthcoming. The patrols sent to capture firearms from enemy garrisons in Borneo and from puppet police forces were only partly successful in solving our immediate firearm needs.

At about 1830H on the same day, a Japanese gunboat armed with 4-inch guns shelled Bato-Bato and lowered landing craft. They attempted to make landings through the Malum River. The guerrillas, led by Lt. Julio Valencia and Sgt. Frayna, drove them back to their ship.

In the early morning of the following day, two Japanese twin engine bombers attacked Bato-Bato again, dropping 16 bombs. "We must have really incurred their wrath," I thought. I was on my way to the damaged outdoor canteen when I heard what was now becoming a familiar sound: the drone of enemy aircraft. They came so fast that almost simultaneously, I saw bombs falling down directly at me as if I was their specific target.

I dove head first at the nearest cover and took a fetal position. At that same moment, the world seemed to be blowing up. There was a blasting crescendo of exploding bombs and the ground heaved beneath me. I was covered with earth, shaken and mortified. More explosions blasted my eardrums.

After dropping over a dozen bombs, the planes took to strafing again at treetop level, spraying bullets in all directions. I got up and rushed to the nearest coconut tree, still bewildered. Others close by also appeared dazed. Civilians were seeking shelter behind trees that were already crowded and were easy targets. Some who were hit started to moan in pain while others simply dropped dead as they were caught in the open. It felt like the Japanese planes would never leave.

Suddenly, they were gone, leaving the guerrilla open canteen totally wrecked. The house by the road that the Australian officers had occupied was in shambles. Beside it were two large holes in the ground created by the bombs. Casualties littered the area around the canteen.

At about the same time that we were being peppered to the ground, the guerrilla force under Lt. Agustin Datiles in Luuk, Jolo island some 80 miles north of Bato-Bato, was also experiencing intense enemy attack by land, sea, and air. Datiles, who was called the "Tiger of Luuk" because of his tenacity and aggressiveness, refused to abandon his position. But

on 22 August 1943, the decimated and battered remnants of his unit were ordered to withdraw to Siasi.

### **Guerilla Attack on Dungun**

The aggressive military action by the Japanese against the guerrilla forces in Sulu encouraged pro-Japanese sectors to flout the resistance. Five miles northeast of Bato-Bato was Dungun River, where Datu Mohammad and two dozen of his followers were reported to have established a fort, or *cotta*, on the 20-hectare delta. This delta, or *kubo*, was a burial ground of royal families centuries before.\* The royal tombs were still revered by the datos, including Mohammad. But having an unfriendly group camped nearby, however, was creating the wrong impression among the islanders in the Tawi-Tawi sector, on whom the guerrillas depended so much for material support.

Plans were then made to effect the surrender of Datu Mohammad or to have him and his men move out. Surrender feelers proved futile. Datu Mohammad was a proud man and felt that he was not giving the guerrillas any trouble by staying in his own domain.

Therefore a plan to destroy the *cotta* was drawn up by Lt. Wagner. Its element for success was surprise. This was, however, difficult to attain by sea because there were guards at the mouth of Dungun River and the civilians living along its banks were the Datu's followers. It was then decided that the siege would be launched by land.

This was a more dangerous approach because of the thick jungle and rough terrain. It needed a good guide. Panglima Ahang Assang acted as guide. He knew the area like the palm of his hand. Datu Mohammad, however, was not without his informers. He must have learned about the impending attack and prepared for it, although he was in the dark as to the exact date of the attack. He refused to leave.

On 8 August 1943, a 12-man patrol led by Lt. Rex Blow headed for Dungun. Two other Australians were with the unit, including Lt. Gillon who was armed with a thompson submachine gun and Sgt. Butler, the automatic rifleman. After a day of hiking through the dense jungle, they

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\* The last royalty buried there was sultan Bariwa. The first Sultan of Sulu, Rajah Bungso is reported to have been buried in Dungun.

found themselves in the vicinity of ~~Dungun~~ the following morning. Unfortunately, their presence was discovered.

Datu Mohammad was taking breakfast with some of his followers and relatives when news reached him that a squad of guerrillas including some white men were on their way to the delta. He immediately organized a "welcoming party" which positioned themselves on an elevated wooded area along the trail leading to the riverbank for ambush. It did not take long before the ambushers saw the guerrillas approaching.

Lt. Blow and his men were unaware that their movements were being monitored. When the attackers were within firing range, Datu Mohammad and his men opened fire. The first to be mortally wounded was Sgt. Butler. The automatic rifleman, Lt. Gillon, was hit on the left arm. At the start of the ambush, the guerrillas were immediately deprived of their main firepower.

With Blow's cover fire, Gillon was pulled out to safety. In the pitched battle, Datu Mohammad and some of his men were killed. However, remnants of his band held on tenaciously to their defensive position, prompting the guerrillas to withdraw. The intense firing from the defenders prevented the patrol from even recovering the bodies of their two companions, Sgt. Butler and Pfc. Santiago Wilson.

Two weeks later, guerrilla intelligence agents in Jolo informed our headquarters that the remnants of Datu Mohammad's force had abandoned Dungun, fearing another attack. Additional information had it that the slain Australian was beheaded and his head, preserved in a basket of salt, was brought as a present to the Japanese commander in Jolo. The latter was so pleased with the pro-Japanese puppets for killing the Australian that he offered arms and ammunitions as rewards.

When Gov. Ombra Amilbansa learned about the death of his uncle Datu Mohammad, he was deeply saddened. But he was also angry and embarrassed about the beheading. Most of those involved were Ombra's own relatives. He castigated them in no uncertain terms "for actions unbecoming of a true Muslim."

### **Razing of Bato-Bato the Third Time**

Late in the afternoon of 19 October 1943, our Thumb Hill signal corps station reported two enemy gunboats moving in the direction of Bato-



Bato. Four enemy barges were also seen following the gunboats. The enemy was planning a big attack on the guerrillas in Bato-Bato.

Lt. Rex Blow, our battalion commander, deployed troops to their assigned defensive positions outside the town and along the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road. Civilians were evacuated. It was a bright moonlit night and Lt. Blow and I were about to proceed to the battalion command post at Km. 4 when the Signal Corps' runner reported to him that the men at Thumb Hill had already left their posts to rejoin the main unit.

The last message reported that the enemy armed vessels had already reached Bato-Bato Bay and that troops may have already landed. Blow turned to me and ordered that I survey the wharf area about a half mile away, and to report my findings to him at the command post.

Half crouched, I moved down the road towards the waterfront. My eyes scanned the road now reclaimed by tall grass. Some questions pre-occupied my frightened mind. "Why did Lt. Blow send me alone? What if the enemy has landed and are now deployed at the wharf area? What if a Japanese scout party has been sent ahead and is cautiously advancing in the same fashion as I am doing?"

I did not worry about being fatally shot because if I were dead, I would not even know it. Or, if they shot me and missed, I could escape. What was troubling and terrifying me was the possibility of being captured. My knowledge of the terrain, however, was a distinct advantage.

It was a bright moonlit night and everything seemed to be at a standstill. It was so quiet I could even hear the beating of my heart. Like a cat stalking prey, I continued to move behind the tall grass until I reached the port zone. I fell flat on my belly for about 10 minutes as I watched and listened.

Everything was quiet at the waterfront. I scanned the area and saw the silhouette of the Japanese vessels at a distance. I was now sure the enemy had not yet landed any troops.

Still moving cautiously, I hurried back to the camp to make my report. I was accosted by the outpost guards at Km. 1 and again at Km. 3. I knew the men were on the alert at their post. Along the way, I overtook a few civilians evacuating to their hideouts.

Before daybreak, big guns of the Japanese naval vessels started pounding suspected guerrilla positions. Over a hundred deafening explosions rained down on us. The shellings were followed shortly by four bombers plastering our barracks and other structures at the town. As

usual, the bombing raids were followed by strafing runs on all suspected guerrilla defense positions in Bato-Bato and nearby areas.

That morning, a strong enemy force landed unopposed. Considering the size and the superior firepower they had, runners were sent to each defense sector with orders to allow the enemy to pass uncontested. One civilian, though, sniped at the advancing troops from atop a coconut tree, killing two Japanese. He was immediately gunned down.

Among the places the enemy troops immediately attacked was a secluded farm where Capt. Jordan A. Hamner (Australia), was operating his radio equipment. But Hamner and his team were able to evacuate safely before the attack. There might have been moles in the guerrilla organization who pointed out Hamner's hideout.

The Japanese returned to the poblacion in the afternoon, burned what was left of the village for the third time, and destroyed 300 sacks of sugar which we had captured from a Malayan sampan that drifted to Tawi-Tawi. The Malay crew was trading with the Japanese. Some of them, however, decided to join the Tawi-Tawi guerrillas while the rest opted to return home to Celebes aboard their sampan.

The day after the enemy had left, Col. Suarez visited Bato-Bato and found it a total wreck, prompting him to make the painful decision of abandoning the town. Only a squad was left at the waterfront.

The areas on both sides of the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road running east to west and bisecting Tawi-Tawi for 13 kilometers soon became the center of guerrilla activities. The regimental headquarters was moved to Km. 6 about five hundred yards deep into the northern side of the road. Companies "A" and "B" were assigned to Kms. 2 and 3, respectively, and the battalion headquarters was stationed at Km. 4. The 3rd Battalion was stationary at the Tarawakan area at the west end of the main road. The 2nd Battalion, on the other hand, was assigned to the villages of Kulape and Parangan northeast of Bato-Bato. These units were just tokens of honest to goodness battalions, mere skeletal forces.

Meanwhile, the Australians and the Americans who were with the Sulu Area Command had indicated their desire to move to the Mindanao mainland. Intelligence reports had it that the Japanese would attack again, this time pursuing the guerrillas into their jungle redoubts.

Poorly armed and with food supplies from the outlying areas coming only in trickles, we felt we were at the mercy of the enemy should they make good their threat to wipe us out. Our jungle hospital was al-

ready overcrowded with patients suffering from malaria, malnutrition, gastroenteritis, pneumonia and skin infections.

### **The Australians' Move To Mindanao**

After Bato-Bato was burned to the ground for the third time and bombing raids on guerrilla positions became near-daily fare, the Australians decided to transfer to the Mindanao mainland. The situation in Tawi-Tawi was becoming untenable for them. Bongao was being developed and fortified by the Japanese into a naval base. The Sanga-Sanga airstrip two miles west of Bongao was being lengthened and permanent structures were being put up using forced labor. Food and material support from the neighboring islands had ground to a halt because guerrilla sympathizers were being harassed and brutalized. Japanese troops and puppet policemen were rounding them up to be tortured and killed.

One morning in October 1943, Col. Suarez arrived unannounced at the temporary cottage where the Australians were billeted to inform them that arrangements had been made for their transfer to Mindanao mainland. There, their chances of returning to Australia by submarine were much greater. Col. Fertig, the overall commander, also had direct radio contact with GHQ Australia.

Having contributed considerably to the development of the guerrilla movement in Sulu during their three-month stay, the Australians were reluctant to leave. By end October 1943, two kumpit manned by guerrilla sailors were made available to them for their trip to Mindanao. Col. Suarez, Lt. Bagis and other guerrilla leaders saw them off. Their departure, however, was kept confidential.

Information from Mindanao a few months later revealed that the Australians arrived safely and were briefly involved in guerrilla activities in the mainland. Except for Lt. Wagner who was killed by a sniper's bullet during an encounter in Misamis, everyone was finally evacuated to Australia by submarine.

Back in Australia, Sgt. Maj. Wallace wrote a book entitled *Return from Hell*. In that book, he narrated his experiences with the Tawi-Tawi guerrillas, including the accomplishments of the signal corps he organized, which helped in sinking several Japanese warships and other sea-craft through valuable information fed to the American high military headquarters.

Wallace, who had a knack for music, had composed a song entitled "In Tawi-Tawi Beach" while he was still with us. Unknown to him, the song was officially adopted as the theme song of Tawi-Tawi province years later.

### **Life in the Jungle**

The enemy siege on Tawi-Tawi continued unabated. Bombings and strafing by planes from Sanga-Sanga became a daily routine to the extent that we knew offhand when to run for cover.

Our jungle hospital, made up of several makeshift huts, was located at Km. 4, about 200 yards from the forest edge. It was under the command of Dr. Frederico Laxamana, former district health officer of Tawi-Tawi. Assisting Dr. Laxamana were two male nurses and six orderlies. The hospital was overflowing with patients, mostly afflicted by malaria. Others were stricken with gastroenteritis, dysentery, bronchitis, pneumonia, skin sores and malnutrition.

We were constantly in our defense positions along the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road, exposed to the elements due to the persistent threats of attack on our jungle redoubt. Food supplies, consisting mainly of grated cassava and dried fish stored in jungle huts, were dangerously low. Hunger and malnutrition was prevalent.

Many of the men on guard and patrol duties, including me, had to be withdrawn due to illness. My incessant coughing and fever made me more of a liability than an asset.

Since it had no available medicines, the hospital could only serve as a "care home." The makeshift beds made of rough wood tied to posts at least kept us from the damp, cold ground. Meals, which were seldom available, consisted mostly of half a coconut shell of cassava, and, occasionally, a piece of spoiled fish.

My stay at the "hospital" somehow did me good because soon I was up and about. I made myself useful by assisting the nurses and orderlies. After two weeks, the sergeant in charge of our secret food supply hut was stricken with malaria. I was temporarily assigned as his replacement.

This particular food storage was the only one remaining for the battalion. But runners coming every day to pick up the food allotments for their respective units were depleting the supplies fast with no replenishment. Furthermore, the dried fish did not keep long in the damp jungle.

Although I was in charge of the food distribution, I depended on Pvt. Antonio Elmo to bring my meal from the battalion kitchen every day. He assisted me during the day, and then returned to his unit for other duties at night.

One day, Elmo didn't show up. I felt unusually lonesome that night. I couldn't help but reflect on my life as a guerrilla, and wondered what fate had in store for me. I thought about my parents who were in Japanese-occupied territory. The recollections came with stark clarity. I also wondered about the whereabouts of my brother Mulo, who was somewhere in that deep jungle. A terrible anxiety gripped me about his fate. The enemy had already developed Bongao into a strong base and it appeared they were there to stay.

Most of my comrades-in-arms were sick; all were hungry. Rumors about forthcoming attacks kept us edgy and forever on alert. Those with guns were ordered to be in defense positions at all times. The situation appeared so bleak I couldn't shake off my loneliness that night. I prayed like I'd never prayed before and I felt closest to Him that moment.

In the faint light of dawn, Elmo returned, not with food, but with an order for me to report to Lt. Luis Frayna, commanding officer of the "A" Company. Frayna and his troops were manning the first line of defense, and I was assigned to be in charge of one of the foxholes overlooking the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road at Km. 3. I had 12 men under me and it was from this assignment that I learned it was 12 November. Suddenly, I realized that the day before was my birthday. Maybe that was why I felt so alone, so forlorn that night.

The food supply hit critical level. Some of the men were ordered to plant short-term crops like cassava and sweet potatoes. Others were assigned to make fish traps that were placed close to the reefs, covered with big stones and visited every day. When the catch was good, it provided us with fresh fish. But the daily strafing raids from Japanese planes stationed in nearby Sanga-Sanga airfield prevented us from visiting the fish traps regularly.

### **Last Stand of Mr. Wilson and Lt. Yanga**

To protect Bato-Bato at its southwestern flank, a detachment of 20 men under 2nd Lt. Bienvenido Yanga was assigned to Lapid-Lapid 4 miles away.

The civilian leader in this area was an elderly gentleman, Mr. Hugh Wilson, an American. He was a retired supervising teacher in the Department of Education and one of the Thomasites, the first American teachers who came to the Philippines at the turn of the century on board the ship, *S.S. Thomas*, to help educate Filipinos. He married a Filipina and decided to open a homestead in Lapid-Lapid after his retirement. Without children of their own, they adopted several local tots.

Mr. Wilson's home was always open to the guerrillas. Whenever they got sick—and many did—they stayed with him and were assured of food and a place to stay. His wife, who was of royal blood, acted as mother and nurse to many of our men.

The Japanese forces in Bongao eight miles away learned from spies of the presence of this American and of his activities in Lapid-Lapid. They decided to get rid of him. One early morning in November 1943, a large Japanese patrol from Bongao landed close by and surrounded his home. They demanded his surrender. In the house with Mr. Wilson was Lt. Yanga, covered with a blanket and shivering from malaria. Armed with a shotgun, Mr. Wilson did not respond to the pounding on the door. Beside him was Yanga with a loaded pistol in hand. The house was pitch dark.

The Japanese continued to pound on the door. Getting no response, they tore it down and rushed into the dark living room. Bedlam ensued. The Japanese were met with shotgun blasts that opened up chests and bellies. Lt. Yanga's pistol also belched fire at the heads of silhouettes storming in. The intruders were easy targets against the faint light coming in through the damaged door, but finally they overcame the two gallant defenders and cut them down with automatic fire.

Troops rushed to the adjacent room and found Mrs. Wilson and several of their adopted children cowering in fear in a corner. They were not spared the enemy's ire, as they were slashed with saber and shot pointblank.

The Japanese left as quickly as they had arrived, carrying with them their dead and wounded. They had succeeded in eliminating the Mr. Wilson, the Grand Old Man of Lapid-Lapid, a staunch supporter of the guerrilla movement. His death was a great loss to the resistance. But Mr. Wilson and the brave young lieutenant made the enemy pay dearly for their intrusion into the privacy of Wilson's home.

By December 1943, military activities peaked at Bongao. The Japanese had fortified the island. Reports from our intelligence operatives

had it that big gun emplacements were being installed along the mountainside and that the island was dotted with concrete bunkers and pillboxes. The Sanga-Sanga airfield had been extended using forced labor from outlying islands. It was from this upgraded airstrip that fighter planes bombed and strafed Bato-Bato and outlying guerrilla strongholds.

Soon, the villages around Bato-Bato were deserted. Enemy air attacks forced the villagers to evacuate to safer islands. The abandonment of their farms deprived the resistance movement of vital sources of food.

On Christmas Day 1944, an armed Japanese barge loaded with troops and towing a kumpit filled with armed puppet policemen was spotted by the Thumb Hill station approaching Bato-Bato. The barge shelled guerrilla positions. Lts. Frayna and Islani Sapal and their men held their fire as they waited for the enemy to land. Then from concealed positions, the guerrillas opened fire with BARs, thompson submachine guns (TSMGs) and rifles. They made a clean lethal sweep of the first wave of Japanese who touched land.

The barge had to beat a hasty retreat, the kumpit still in tow. The island defenders kept firing; the kumpit received the brunt of the last shots. Reports later indicated that among those killed in the kumpit was Data Tamboyong, a policeman from Ubol, Simunul. He was a friend of my family, forced to accept the position to feed his big family.

Two days later, two Japanese barges again shelled the villages along the southeastern coast that were friendly to the guerrillas. Many civilians died in that attack.

### **Gen. MacArthur's Message**

Early in January 1944, we had reason to be elated despite the bleak situation we were in. We were greeted with a New Year's message from Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief, southwest Pacific Area, through Col. Fertig.

This was the full text of the message:

To my commanders in the Philippines: With the dawn of the new year, please convey to your officers and men, and to the civilians who are giving you their support, my warm and personal greetings and grateful acknowledgment of resolute past service of inestimable value to the joint cause of the

American and Filipino peoples. Tell them that I confidently look to the coming year as a period in which every month sees significant and decisive gains towards the final and complete destruction of Japanese military power; and that in this period I request that every man shall adhere to the path of duty with the same courage and invincible determination that has characterized the spirit of Filipino resistance during the difficult and trying past. Tell them that as we enter the new year, it is my fervent prayer that Almighty God will guide, strengthen and protect them, and speed the day of my return to personally direct operations for the permanent expulsion of the invaders from the Philippines' soil and the restoration of peace, happiness and security to Philippine homes.

This message raised our morale and further inspired us in our resistance of the cruel invaders.

### **Creation of the Sulu Area Command**

On 12 February 1944, Col. Suarez received a radiographic message from Gen. Douglas MacArthur, informing him of the separation of the Tawi-Tawi guerrilla movement from the 10th Military District in Mindanao.

The message stated:

With infinite satisfaction, I have learned of your activity and that of your gallant Moro followers on and in the vicinity of Tawi-Tawi. I desire to recognize the resolute resistance to the enemy in your area by the establishment of separate command known as the Sulu Area Command to embrace the Sulu archipelago. It is my further desire that you assume this command.

A letter from Gen. MacArthur to Col. Suarez following the radiographic message confirmed his earlier order:

Dear Col. Suarez:

This will confirm my radiographic advice of your appointment as Commander, Sulu Area Command.

While it is difficult for me, with my present limited knowledge of the exact military situation in the area of your command, to direct in detail the



cause of the future deployment of your forces, it is of particular importance that I obtain information covering every disposition throughout the area and close observation of all enemy naval movement through the several passages separating the Sulu and Celebes Sea.

The latter information if received promptly is of immediate combat value to our submarines patrolling nearby waters. For the accomplishment of this mission, I am sending on the same vessel that carries this letter a supply of military stores set forth in your radiogram on the 8th February with P50,000, Philippine currency that will permit you to finance the intelligence operations herein directed. In the disbursement of these funds, you should keep a good accounting for later submission to this headquarters. Due to difficulties in transport, every care should be taken by you to conserve these supplies.

Please convey to your followers my grateful acknowledgement of loyal service during the past difficult period and my assurance that the military situation is becoming increasingly favorable to our cause.

Very truly yours,

/s/ Douglas MacArthur  
Commander in Chief

Lt. Col. Alejandro Suarez  
Commanding Officer  
Sulu Area Command

### **Rendezvous with a U.S. Submarine**

On 8 February 1944, our jungle headquarters went gaga over a message we received from GHQ Australia. The message ordered Col. Suarez to prepare for the arrival of a U.S. submarine delivering 25 tons of firearms, ammunition and supplies for the Sulu guerrillas. Suarez was instructed to meet the submarine in the Celebes Sea behind Manukmangka island.

Colonel Suarez replied that the designated island was only 6 miles away from Ubol in Simunul island, the seat of the Japanese puppet government, and just 10 miles from Bongao, the main Japanese island fort in Tawi-Tawi. Col. Suarez recommended instead the western side of

Mantabuan Island, 15 miles farther northeast, as the rendezvous site. His recommendation was accepted by GHQ Australia and the rendezvous was set for 22 February.

With little time left, the colonel immediately set preparations in motion. Six big kumpit manned by trusted boatmen were chartered and proceeded to Mantabuan four days prior to the rendezvous with the U.S. submarine. The team watched a Japanese destroyer prowling suspiciously behind Mantabuan as if it had a foreknowledge of the submarine's arrival.

The day before the rendezvous, a civilian acting suspiciously in the vicinity of the guerrilla camp was shot by a nervous guard. The incident divulged the guerrillas' presence on the island, endangering the success of the mission. The rendezvous thus had to be postponed. The message was sent immediately to Australia requesting a change of date and venue. The rendezvous was transferred to Languyan, 15 miles northwest of Bato-Bato, the date reset to 6 March 1944.

When the initial message about the submarine's arrival at Mantabuan island was received, secret trails through thick jungles from Bato-Bato were cut to Suka Bulan, a newly opened guerrilla sector, 15 miles northeast. The initial plan was to unload all the shipment from the Mantabuan rendezvous to Suka Bulan, then distribute them to the guerrillas there. Hundreds of guerrillas started trekking to Suka Bulan. Everyone was eager to get his share of new guns and bullets.

Then another radiographic message came resetting the rendezvous to Languyan. Runners were immediately sent out to tell the troops to proceed to Languyan. New problems arose. Getting to Languyan was no walk in the park as there were no trails through the dangerous mountain ranges and rough terrain. Furthermore, most of the men had been without food for days. The near-daily torrential downpours made our marches even more difficult, though they gave us brief chances to rest. There was an easier way-through the sea-but this was out of the question because of constant enemy sea patrols.

Although sick, half-naked, tired and hungry, we still marched on to our destination. The thought of getting new firearms gave us strength and pushed us forward. Everybody accepted the ordeal willingly. Nobody complained. At the same time, we were apprehensive over fresh intelligence reports that the newly reinforced enemy forces in Bongao

and Sanga-Sanga were preparing for another massive attack on guerrilla positions in Tawi-Tawi.

### Arrival of the "Narwhal"

The transport submarine *Narwhal* surfaced as scheduled off Bohi Gansa near Languyan, on the northwestern coast of Tawi-Tawi with the much-awaited 20-ton shipment for the Sulu Freedom Fighters. We anxiously waited at the shore ready to haul the supplies to our headquarters.

The unloading proved to be most difficult because of the rough sea. The six kumpit had a difficult time holding on to the half-submerged vessel. Capt. Latta, *Narwhal's* skipper, ordered four rubber boats inflated for the guerrillas' use. Oxygen hissed from metal tanks as the rubber boats were readied. Only four trips were made by the kumpit and the rubber boats when suddenly, the radar detected two oncoming enemy destroyer escorts.

Capt. Latta immediately ordered the kumpit and the rubber boats to shore and the deck cleared. He made sure all the crew were accounted for before the hatches were secured. In the confusion, however, two officers of the Sulu Area Command, Lts. Konglam Teo and Jose Valera, inadvertently joined the crew of the submarine. *Narwhal* made an emergency dive and eluded the enemy vessels and escaped through the Sibutu Channel.

At the shore, Lt. Sindayen gave orders to open the crates and distribute the firearms, ammunition, and grenades to the troops. Those with BARs were ordered to position themselves strategically along the bay in anticipation of enemy attack. Others carried extra firearms and ammunition for their comrades left behind to man their stations. Those who arrived late in Languyan were likewise issued their individual firearms and ordered to start hauling the remaining crates.

It was a most hazardous mission but everybody was excited. The light automatic rifle called "carbine" especially pleased the men because it would be quite practical to use in jungle fighting. The fully loaded kumpit were ordered to proceed to predesignated hiding places.

Many crates and boxes left on the deck when the submarine made its hasty dive were seen the following morning floating in the sea, some of them washed ashore. Lt. Sindayen, using one of the empty rubber

boats, personally led the operation to retrieve them. In the other rubber boat was Sgt. Juaini Mohammad with some men also helping recover the floating crates and boxes.

Suddenly, two enemy warplanes coming from the direction of Bongao swooped down and strafed Lt. Sindayen and his men. They were sitting ducks out there in the open sea. Lt. Sindayen was hit on the back as they frantically paddled towards the shore. Even with a cal. .50 machine gun bullet lodged in his spine, he still managed to crawl to the shore and hide in the bushes. Sgt. Mohammad, whose right leg dangled from a fractured tibia, also succeeded in reaching the shore. Being athletic, he hopped towards the jungle edge, tailed by bullets which kicked the ground around him. The resistance lost a handful of men who were either killed or wounded in that incident. Lt. Sindayen and Sgt. Mohammad survived.

With the arrival of a fresh supply of firepower, the morale of the troops reached new heights. Everybody was now fully armed. We hooked the grenades onto our harnesses. Those issued BARs, besides having their ammunition belts, were also issued bandoliers which made them look like authentic warriors. Some of the floating crates retrieved from the sea contained medicines which Dr. Laxamana and his orderlies busily sorted. He had to read the accompanying brochures to familiarize himself with the new drugs.



## Chapter IV **Tawi-Tawi Under Siege**

**T**awi-Tawi, the field of operations of the Sulu Area Command, was so geographically strategic that one wonders why the Japanese Imperial forces failed to crush its guerrilla movement while Col. Suarez was still developing it. The intelligence reports the command furnished to GHQ Australia regarding Japanese naval movements in the area had led to the sinking by submarines of fully loaded enemy transport ships on their way to the fighting zones in the southwest Pacific.

Now apprised of the recent delivery of munitions and supplies by American submarine to the Sulu guerrillas, the Japanese intensified their attacks on Col. Suarez's resistance movement.

*Narwhal's* delivery of supplies to our force was preceded by weeks of almost daily visits by Japanese warplanes from the Sanga-Sanga airfield which was only 12 miles away.

In other war theaters, the Japanese Imperial naval forces were absorbing reverses at the hands of the reinforced U.S. Pacific Fleet under the command of Admiral Chester Nimitz. They had just lost their commander in chief, Admiral Inaroku Yamamoto, in an air ambush over Bougainville. Soon after, the Japanese combined naval force had become primarily defensive.

Admiral Minichi Koga, an efficient but conservative officer, took over Admiral Yamamoto's place. A pragmatist, Koga realized the growing strength of the American naval forces. Koga was also a firm believer of the "decisive battle victory concept" popularized by the epic victory of Admiral Togo at Tsushima against a larger Russian fleet 40 years earlier.

In February 1944, Admiral Koga devised a battle plan he called "Operation Z." The strategy was to draw the U.S. naval fleet to the Philippine Sea where land-based aircraft would inflict as much damage as possible, to be followed by a juggernaut of the combined Imperial Naval Air Fleet standing nearby.

The raid on Truk by the U.S. Fifth Fleet on 7 February 1944, however, compelled Admiral Koga to slightly modify his plan. He sought temporary shelter at Palau and decided on the most ideal launching pad for Operation Z. One possibility Koga considered was Tawi-Tawi, because of the island's proximity to the Borneo oil wells. Borneo oil was of such a high grade that it could be used as fuel for a warship's boiler even in its crude form.

Close to the end of March, Koga gave orders to transfer his headquarters from the battleship *Musasahi*, anchored at Palau, to southern Mindanao. After issuing his battle plan for Operation Z, Koga boarded a plane headed for Tawi-Tawi. But tragedy struck along the way. His plane got lost in a heavy storm. Koga's chief of staff, Admiral Fukidome, ditched off Cebu. Filipino guerrillas under Col. James Cushing saw the plane crash and fished Fukidome out of the water.

A briefcase Fukidome was carrying sank but was recovered by the guerrillas. That seemingly trivial incident turned out to be a turning point for the Allied cause. The briefcase contained secret documents including plans for Operation Z. The priceless document reached Gen. MacArthur's headquarters by submarine and in turn was sent to the CINCPAC (Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet) headquarters at Pearl Harbor.

Admiral Koga's death left a vacuum which was filled in by Admiral Soemu Toyoda, a brilliant, meticulous officer. Formerly commander of the Yokosuka Naval Base, Toyoda chose as his chief of staff Admiral Ryunosuko Kusaka who, unlike him, had broad battle experience. Kusaka agreed with Koga's strategy to have hundreds of land-based planes of the First Air Fleet stationed within striking distance to attack most of the American naval forces before Ozawa's fleet arrived to finish off the job. As approved by Admiral Toyoda, the plot was renamed "Plan A-GO" (Operation A.)

In late March 1944, the main Japanese naval force, now called the First Mobile Fleet, was under the command of Vice-Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa. From its Palau base, the fleet sailed first to Lingga Road off Singapore. Although it was close to its source of fuel supply in Borneo, the fleet was far from its objective in the Philippines.

Kusaka must have adhered to the Chinese proverb "No matter how strong the bow, an arrow in long flight cannot tear the sheerest cloth." He thus decided on a location where Plan A-GO would be most effec-

tive. So on 10 May 1944, he ordered Ozawa's First Mobile Fleet of 59 vessels to proceed to Tawi-Tawi.

Admiral Ozawa's fleet included 9 aircraft carriers with a total load of 462 fighter planes, 5 battleships, and a host of cruisers, destroyers and other vessels. The largest Japanese naval fleet was fated to clash soon with the largest American carrier fleet in the battle of the Philippine Sea.

### **Japanese Offensive**

"Wipe out the Guerillas" could well have been the battlecry of the Japanese forces. In February and March 1944, the Japanese relentlessly bombed and strafed our defense positions along the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road and in Tawi-Tawi. We knew that an even bigger offensive was in the offing. We were equipped with new firearms delivered by *Narwhal*. The BAR remained our most powerful weapon. We did not kid ourselves; we were still no match for the military might of the enemy. But we had resolved to make them pay dearly for their victory. What we did not know was that Tawi-Tawi was soon to be the temporary base of the largest remaining fleet of the Japanese—the one under Admiral Ozawa.

Capt. Ismael Ratag reported that the biggest offensive ever against us would come by 12 April. With some 6,000 battle-tested troops, the enemy would make simultaneous landings in Bato-Bato in the east, Tarawakan on the west and Lapid-Lapid on the south, then converge along Km. 6, the vicinity of the guerrilla headquarters. Additional information also revealed that 8 war vessels, 24 landing barges, 7 launchers and 6 fighter planes would be involved in the invasion.

This all-out offensive was meant to deal the final blow on the Sulu resistance movement in Tawi-Tawi. Details of the report later proved to be fairly accurate.

With the arrival of Capt. Ratag's intelligence report, we braced ourselves for a final stand. Col. Suarez ordered all his forces to new defense positions since we suspected that our former entrenchments had been pinpointed by the enemy.

The 1st Battalion manned defense positions in Bato-Bato from Km. 1 to Km. 6. Heading the defense of the area were Capts. Frayna and Ratag and Lt. Jumaadil Aral. Lapid-Lapid, which was linked to the main Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road by a trail, was to be defended by a 30-man force under Lt. Datiles. The 3rd Battalion, led by Lts. Imao Istino Abtahi





and Paraji Usman, were deployed to defense positions at Km. 7 to Km. 13 in Tarawakan. The 1st Battalion command post was positioned at the vicinity of Km. 6, about 200 yards from the main road. The regimental headquarters was 500 yards away from the 1st Battalion command post.

Defending the battalion HQ were scores of men led by Lts. Julio Valencia and Saberalam Maut, Engracio Guligado, Maximiniano Velasquez and Gua Lee. The 2nd Battalion had already been moved to a newly opened sector at the Suka Bulan and Sowen Batang areas, 15 miles northeast of Bato-Bato. This sector was under the command of Capt. Guy Strattan. Among his followers were Lts. Abdulrahim Imao, Islani Sapal and Julaide Tambehik.

In the new strategy, the Suka Bulan sector was to be the guerrilla area for retreat and the only remaining source of food supply. By chance, the short-term crops planted by friendly farmers and guerrillas consisting of cassava, sweet potatoes and corn were just about ready for harvesting.

The Sulu guerrilla force in Tawi-Tawi was made up of a little over 1,000 men armed with carbines, thompson submachine guns (TSMGs), BARs, and grenades. Additional boxes of ammunition were opened for distribution to the troops. With rather a large area to defend, we were thinly spread out, with the most number of men deployed along the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road. Most of our defense positions were situated 50 to 100 yards from the main road, well-concealed by bushes and second growth woods. Deeper into the jungle were our fallback positions, accessible by trails. To beef up the fighting force, the intelligence agents were also given combat assignments.

On the eve of the great invasion, a plane coming from the direction of Bongao hovered low over us but dropped no bombs, only leaflets, written in Arabic and English. The leaflets conveyed the Japanese message for us to voluntarily surrender, saying the leaflets could be used as our safe conduct pass to get through the enemy lines. But some stated the stern warning that the entire guerrilla forces would be demolished if we refused to give up.

Another leaflet contained ridiculous propaganda captioned "East Asia... Arising." It showed a map of the southwest Pacific area with arrows indicating the thrusts of the Japanese advances towards Australia in the southwest and Hawaii and the U.S. mainland in the east and northeast.

Had we not been regularly updated on the developments in other war theaters, we would have been disheartened by the propaganda.

Those written in Arabic were obviously intended for the Muslim guerrillas who made up the majority of the force. The Japanese implored the Muslims to surrender, assuring them safety, peace and happiness. The leaflets, however, also carried the warning that refusal to lay down their guns would be met with decapitation should they be captured, and that their families would also be arrested and executed.

Nobody took notice of the enemy's words, despite the precarious situation we were in. We had resolved to fight and be ready to make the supreme sacrifice.

We were fully aware that not even the fresh supply of firearms would put us on equal footing with the Japanese. We knew we were badly outnumbered and outgunned. We all knew that it could be our chance to avenge the death of some of our comrades-in-arms, as well as the atrocities the enemy had committed against innocent civilians. Most of us were still young, but we were old enough to know that we were fighting for a just cause, even if it meant giving up our lives.

Even the sick who could stand up and fire a gun were raring to fight. They took positions behind trees around the jungle hospital and the supply operations (S-4) headquarters. They, too, vowed not to be captured alive.

As we waited, the tension got so thick you could almost slice it with a knife. It was ironic that we prepared so hard for the event but hoped it would never come at all.

If it was any consolation, the S-4 had a week's supply of *biamban*, a preparation of steamed cassava wrapped in banana leaves.

The night passed in agonizing slowness. Before the break of dawn the next morning, all hell broke loose. Eight enemy warships unleashed their fury on our positions in the Bato-Bato Tarawakan area with shelling that lasted for about one hour. This was followed by air attacks carried out by six Japanese warplanes which showered us with bombs and cal. 50 bullets. We were being pulverized and there was nothing we could do about it. At least, not yet. It was cold that fateful morning, but all of us were perspiring profusely.

### **The Signal Unit at Thumb Hill**

On 11 April 1944, the day before the massive enemy attack on Bato-

Bato, the guerrilla area of operations, its Thumb Hill look-out station, was busy monitoring enemy warships and other armed vessels around Bongao, the Japanese naval base. Bongao was nine miles southwest of Thumb Hill and twelve miles from Bato-Bato.

Sgt. Yusop Kalbit and his six men had not been relieved from their post for three weeks but had no reason to complain. They knew the men supposed to relieve them were now assigned to defense line duties along the Bato-Bato-Tarawakan Road and were busy digging new foxholes and trenches. The original defense positions had been compromised by low flying enemy observation planes.

The food supplies they received consisted mainly of meager old grated cassava and spoiled dried fish. Again, they had no reason to voice out their complaints because food supplies for all units came from the same jungle supply huts that were now almost completely depleted.

That afternoon, a strange event took place. While Sgt. Kalbit and his men were discussing strategy for escape from the hill should the need arise, a big bird flapped its wings then perched on the top of the huge observation tree at the summit of the hill. This had not happened before. One shot rang and the bird dropped dead. In no time it was roasted over fire and the men had a feast.

"I did not eat my share of the cooked bird. I just licked it, wrapped it in a large leaf and placed it in my tattered shirt pocket," Kalbit recalled. Everyone appeared apprehensive that evening. An earlier message received from Bato-Bato indicated a probable enemy assault the following morning. The busy sea traffic in Bongao Bay supported the intelligence report.

Tired from the day's work, Sgt. Kalbit fell asleep past midnight only to be awakened by a strong pull on his legs. He almost fell from the jungle hut. Looking around, he noticed all of his men were fast asleep. A deeply religious man, he said aloud, "If you are evil, depart from me, but if you are my guardian angel, do not forsake me," and he went back to sleep.

No sooner had he dozed off when he felt the same strong pull on his legs. The jungle could be mysterious, he thought, but this time he got up, shouted at his men to get up and immediately vacate the hut. They followed his orders and were soon rushing downhill.

Suddenly, the summit of the hill became as bright as day. Searchlights from nearby enemy warships were now focused on this strategic

location. Soon there were explosions everywhere. They looked back and saw their hut get a direct hit and blown to pieces.

They continued their escape until they reached the new defense position manned by Lt. Frayna and his men along the southern side of the Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road. They reported to Lt. Frayna what happened to their outpost on Thumb Hill. Frayna needed more men and assigned them to man one of the foxholes along the defense line as they waited for the enemy troops that had just landed at the pier area unopposed.

As the sun started to rise on the horizon, runners from Km. 1 defense area informed us the enemy was advancing in two columns. The first—and bigger—force was moving along the main road while the second was advancing towards the forest edge towards our positions. No sooner had we received the report at our battalion headquarters when we heard the staccato gunfire.

It turned out that the second column ran smack into our advance outpost under Lt. Jumaadil Aral and Sgt. Jumah Wadjad.

The skirmishes lasted for about 30 minutes. Then there was a lull. Meanwhile, the first column marched ahead under the watchful eyes of the "A" Co. troops under Lt. Frayna who were on a vantage point. Upon reaching an abandoned guerrilla defense line on the right side of the Tarawakan Road, the enemy started mortar shelling followed shortly by machine gun fire at suspected guerrilla positions. When they got no response, they moved on.

Suddenly, there was bedlam. Lt. Frayna's forces ambushed the main column with automatic and semiautomatic weapons from their position on the left side of the road. The Japanese were completely taken by surprise. Many dropped dead at the first hail of gunfire.

The Japanese retreated but not for long. Still at a loss as to our exact positions, they regrouped. Meanwhile, the firing had ceased at our advanced post. Lt. Jumaadil and his unit withdrew to designated areas at Km. 4 to reinforce the defenses of the intelligence unit headed by Capt. Ratag.

Fighting along our first defense line lasted for over two hours. The warplanes also continued to reconnoiter our positions, dropping bombs and strafing suspected guerrilla strongholds. The mortar shelling likewise refused to die down.

Again, there was a lull and we knew our forces had withdrawn to another fallback position, using a network of secret jungle trails. The

main enemy column which sustained heavy casualties did not press their pursuit of Lt. Frayna and his men marched on, but moved more cautiously.

At Km. 4 Capt. Ratag's unit once more pounced on the main column from ambush positions concealed by a huge log covered with earth. Because of a deep gorge separating their position from the main road, Ratag's unit kept firing at will since the Japanese could not easily advance on them. Among Ratag's men was my brother Mulo.

Tension got the better of me as I listened to the rapid staccato of machine gun fire coupled with the barrage of mortars. The column moving along the forest edge was closing in on Ratag's force. There was another lull, indicating Ratag's unit had moved over to another defense position. After a one-hour respite in firing, we saw the main Japanese enemy column regroup at Km. 5 and advance again along the main road.

I was in charge of a group of 12 men as advance guards of the battalion command post. We took positions in a heavily wooded area some 30 meters away from the jungle edge. Some 15 meters close to the clearing was Pvt. Bonnie Diaz whom I assigned as our scout. We were positioned between buttresses of large tree roots which gave us good protection and cover. As we watched the main column go by, I guessed the enemy wouldn't detect us in our well-camouflaged position. But 3 Japanese walked right onto Diaz who was leaning against a tree for cover. He shot them pointblank, with the latter not even knowing what happened.

Suddenly, the second column which was advancing along the forest edge appeared against a bright background. They were easy targets from where we opened fire. They fired back, aimlessly, caught by surprise as we raked the enemy column with automatic fire.

As we continued belching fire, Lts. Trespeces and Maut and their men joined in the ambush, forcing what was left of the enemy to withdraw towards a downward clearing. Soon, mortar shells accompanied by machine gun fire rained on our positions from the direction of the main column. The explosions were nerve-wracking. I motioned my men to withdraw as the firing from the second column stopped.

We moved over to a deeper position in the command post area to join Lt. Trespeces's group. We waited but no enemy appeared. Our fears and anxiety had vanished as we eagerly awaited their approach.

After another hour of peace and quiet, we heard gunfire from the direction of Km. 6 where Lt. Lasdin Badal and his men were positioned.

It turned out the main column had attempted to enter the jungle but was repulsed by Badal's unit. Expecting a stronger defense force in the jungle guarding the regimental command post, the Japanese stopped their advance and started to dig along the main road.

As a back-up cover for the main enemy force advancing along the main road, Japanese naval vessels continued their shelling on suspected guerrilla positions along the Tarawakan shores in the west. More Japanese troops aboard barges hit land but were met with heavy gunfire from the units of Capt. Abdulhalim Imao and Sgt. John Allen who were well-entrenched. They wiped out the first wave of Japanese who landed, despite the fact that a second barge was raking the defenders' position with heavy machine gun fire. Imao and Allen's units stubbornly held on as they kept firing. They had a dozen BARs which exacted a heavy toll on the enemy, who nonetheless pressed their attack.

With 20mm. cannons and 50 cal. machine guns from the third barge to cover the landing of troops from the second barge, the situation became too hot to handle for Imao's and Allen's units, and they were forced to withdraw deeper into the jungle.

The regrouped enemy column that landed in Tarawakan took some time before pressing their advance to Km. 6 from the opposite direction. Lt. Abtahi Istino and his men fell back but not before inflicting more casualties on the Japanese. The exchange of gunfire between Abtahi's unit and the advancing Japanese recurred after a brief respite with the latter sustaining more casualties.

At Km. 7, the guerrilla troops under Lt. Paraji Usman once more pounded on the remaining Japanese. Paraji's units disengaged about one hour later leaving behind a heavily beaten enemy who later on joined up with their comrades who came from Bato-Bato. It must have been frustrating for the Japanese to overrun guerrilla positions at a heavy toll only to find the place completely vacated.

Simultaneous with their landings in Bato-Bato and Tarawakan, a Japanese force of about 200 men also established beachheads in Lapid-Lapid. Lt. Datiles and his 30-strong unit briefly engaged the enemy in their area before withdrawing. At Km. 6, the Japanese again established foxholes.

We estimated that the enemy suffered more than 500 men killed or wounded on day one of their big invasion while the island defenders sustained only 13 killed and about 26 wounded. We were more than pleased

with the result of the initial skirmishes but it was no time for celebration. The proverbial Sword of Damocles continued to hang over our heads as the Japanese had the manpower and firepower to demolish us.

### **Jungle Warfare**

We braced ourselves for stronger enemy attacks against our jungle defense lines on the second day. From Km. 3 to Km. 8 on the north side of the main road, we had pockets of defenders positioned some 100 to 300 yards inside the jungle. On the other side of the road, we had fewer units with less men, led by Lt. Frayna, to distract enemy concentration on our side of the road.

Our assessment of the enemy's strategy appeared quite accurate as they began firing at dawnbreak from various areas. We compensated for our lack of manpower and weaponry with better cover and familiarity with the terrain. I was assigned to the main defense position at the battalion command post.

The enemy fired at different sectors to try draw fire from the guerrillas so that they would know our concealed positions. Meanwhile, a small enemy unit entered the jungle followed by a larger force of 50 to 100 men. From a distance, it was easy to tell whether or not the firing was being done by our comrades. Rapid staccato machine gun fire accompanied by mortar blasts were usually from the enemy; automatic or semiautomatic shots certainly came from the guerrillas. We could also tell where the enemy was positioned by merely listening to their gun reports, thus we were able to establish ambush positions ahead of time.

This type of guerrilla tactic had been effective as shown by the heavy toll we had inflicted on the enemy despite our inferiority in firepower. But the grim reality that we were badly outnumbered, that our annihilation could just be a matter of time, continued to haunt us.

Strategy-wise, we had the upper hand. Whenever we felt that our position was becoming untenable, we would simply fade deeper into the jungle or momentarily allow the enemy to pass by in peace, only to hit them again as they returned by the same route. Our network of jungle trails proved invaluable in withdrawing and staging ambushes.

By the third and fourth day, we were getting so familiar with the enemy's movements we could literally smell them. Even then, such familiarity did not help improve our chances.

The ominous sign was our scouts' report that the Japanese were constructing permanent and semipermanent structures in Bato-Bato and Tarawakan on both ends of the main road bisecting the island.

Other reports had it that the families of some guerrillas were still on the Japanese side of the road awaiting rescue. Several small units had to be formed to rescue those evacuees from Japanese-held territory which was under heavy patrol.

On my part, I was to rescue a group at Km. 5 mainly because of my familiarity with the terrain and the fact that one of my objectives was the family of Lt. and Mrs. Teodoro Albarracin, my godparents. With four men, I scouted the main road before sundown to ensure that it was safe to cross over.

Since we knew where the Albarracins used to evacuate during air raids, we took advantage of the little daylight left and proceeded to the area. We found Mrs. Albarracin, her daughter and a niece huddled together in a makeshift hut. Nearby were three other families with children. They were greatly relieved to see us, and they cried. They had been without food for four days.

We wanted to take them to our side of the road that same night, taking advantage of the darkness. But we decided against it as it was difficult for the children—and dangerous for us—to move in the dark. At dawn the following morning, seeing the road clear, we made our cross over, all 15 of us, to the other side of the road. I led them to an S-4 makeshift hut where the Albarracins had a happy reunion. The other evacuees also found their way into the arms of their guerrilla relatives.

On day six, Capt. Abdulhalim Imao, who was in charge of the western defense force in Tarawakan, conferred with Col. Suarez at the regimental command post. Word of Imao's daring exploits on day one, when he had wiped out two barges full of Japanese in Tarawakan, had spread like wildfire in the resistance. The dramatic ambushes he conducted also served as an inspiration to us.

Like most Tausug fighters, Imao wore a colorful fez cloth around his head. He also donned a blue *sawal*, a loose skirt held tightly around the waist by his ammunition belt. He was armed with a thompson submachine gun. Cool and soft-spoken, he emanated an aura of invincibility and self-confidence which rubbed off on all of us.

Capt. Imao was my kind of jungle fighter hero: ferocious and fearless in combat. His effective hit-and-run tactic had inspired confidence



among his men. He was popular among the guerrillas.

Many years after the war, I had the opportunity to see artworks by a foremost Muslim sculptor and artist. Among his pieces I admired most was the bust of a "Muslim Warrior." I was particularly impressed with the facial expression of the bust. He carried that familiar air of aggressiveness and fearlessness, plus the headpiece and Muslim shirt partly exposing the chest.

Sensing my interest in the bust, the artist explained that his model for that impressive piece of art was an uncle who was a guerrilla hero, Capt. Abdulhalim Imao.

### **A Close Call for the S-2 Unit**

In the later part of April 1944, the Japanese occupied Bato-Bato and Tarawakan at both ends of the road that ran across from Tawi-Tawi island during their massive attack on the island. Ambuscades staged by guerrilla troops continued to harass the enemy, but food supplies were completely depleted. The civilians in the area were also starving and were moving out of Bato-Bato or were surrendering to the enemy.

Our intelligence (S-2) unit under Capt. Ismael Ratag, which had functioned as a front line combat unit during the first few days of the enemy assault, was ordered to move out to the Suka Bulan sector 10 miles northeast where the skeletal 2nd Battalion was operating, and now bracing for the expected enemy attack. This S-2 section was ordered to proceed to Suka Bulan by way of a trail on the eastern coast and join the 2nd Battalion.

Hurrying to reach their destination before the anticipated enemy assault, they found themselves overtaking columns of civilians escaping northwards. As they descended towards the coast from the jungle elevations close to Balimbing village, the S-2 unit observed that the civilians ahead of their column would suddenly disappear along the curved trail and not show up further down the path.

As the S-2 unit started to negotiate the turn, one of the civilians in front shouted "Jipon!", meaning "Japanese!". This shout alerted the intelligence unit led by Sgt. Romulo Espaldon. He immediately detoured to the right and was swallowed by the dense wooded area. The rest of the column including Sgt. Juan Balisi, Cpls. Maheya Naduha, Hussin Ratag, and the rest of the unit also disappeared into the forest. Without the warning shout of the civilian evacuee, key members of the S-2 unit would

have been captured. Behind the curved portion of the trail was a platoon of Japanese marines accompanied by pro-Japanese policemen who could have identified members of the guerrilla intelligence unit.

### **Suka Bulan**

After fighting for ten days in the Bato-Bato sector, the Japanese shifted their attention to Suka Bulan, 15 miles northeast defended by a lean guerrilla battalion and where our remaining source of food supply was located. This particular sector was now under the command of Lt. Abdulrahim Imao of the famed Fighting 21, brother of Capt. Abdulhalim Imao. Lt. Imao's executive officer was Lt. Islani Sapal.

On 21 April, six enemy planes started bombing and strafing guerrilla positions in Suka Bulan. Three days later, the enemy dropped leaflets demanding the surrender of the 2nd Battalion defending the area. Other leaflets were copies of those dropped two weeks earlier on the Bato-Bato sector. It assured the guerrillas who would surrender total pardon regardless of the gravity of their "crimes," including the killing of Japanese soldiers. The guerrillas were given an ultimatum of two days after which they would be executed if captured. Some of the materials, signed by a Col. M. Takumi, were directed at Col. Suarez, assuring the latter of safety and a high position in the "New Republic of the Philippines" should he surrender.

Col. Takumi went to Buan Island across from Suka Bulan on 24 April. With him were puppet-government officials and other high-ranking Japanese army officials. Through Datu Hiyang Ismael, a respected community leader in Banaran, who was also a friend of the guerrillas, Col. Takumi sent a letter to Col. Suarez. The Japanese officer surmised that Col. Suarez had left Bato-Bato to join his intact troops in Suka Bulan, where food was still available. After two weeks of relentless assaults on their jungle lairs, the Bato-Bato forces were decimated by combat injuries, sickness and starvation.

Col. Suarez got Takumi's letter through Lt. Ratag, the guerrillas' intelligence chief. But Col. Suarez had had enough of the enemy's tricks especially when he was a prisoner of war (POW) at a concentration camp in Lanao. Unknown to Col. Suarez, an unfortunate incident had happened: Datu Hiyang was lynched by some guerrillas while he was on his way back to Buan.

The deadline for surrender passed with not a single guerrilla heeding the enemy's call. Four days later, some 500 Japanese troops were let loose in the area. The local defenders bided their time as they simply watched the enemy land and assemble about one kilometer inland. Having had no action and seeing the guerrilla barracks abandoned, the Japanese believed that the defenders had fled. But on the following day, Capt. Imao and his unit ambushed two platoons of Japanese troops. At about the same time, a larger enemy force was waylaid by a guerrilla unit led by Lt. Islani Sapal.

A larger Japanese force was sent the following day to go after the main unit of the 2nd Battalion, which, the enemy came to realize, had not left Suka Bulan after all. They walked right into an ambush by 50 guerrillas led by Lt. Jalaide Tambehik and armed with BARs, thompson submachine guns and carbines. Again, it was a lopsided result in favor of the resistance fighters. The Japanese command poured more troops into Suka Bulan.

The fighting was almost a reenactment of the first few days of skirmishes in Bato-Bato. The enemy entered the jungle in full force in search of the guerrillas, who kept inflicting heavy casualties on them. In frustration, the Japanese troops destroyed anything that looked like a guerrilla defense position or supply hut. On the fifth day, the Japanese came upon a seven-man guerrilla band harvesting cassava, killing all of them.

The Japanese failed battle with the 2nd Battalion's main force which, at the time, had regrouped into small units. This proved to be highly effective in staging ambushes—the enemy's biggest headache. With more Japanese reinforcements reaching Suka Bulan, the enemy succeeded in destroying the guerrillas' food huts, farms and sugarcane fields which were invaluable to the resistance.

After two weeks, Col. Suarez, who was directing operations from his command post, ordered his troops to disengage and withdraw to Siratang and Sowang Batang where food was still available. The order was to split into even smaller units for better chances of survival. At the time, though, the starving troops from Bato-Bato were approaching Suka Bulan only to find it under enemy control. So they proceeded through Siratang and Sowang Batang towards Cawa-Cawa, Maraning, Si Darling, Dandangan and Bas-Bas in search of food.

While fighting was going on in Suka Bulan, contacts with the enemy were becoming frequent in Bato-Bato. The enemy had to pay a high

price for entering the guerrillas' jungle redoubts, but they learned from civilians who had surrendered that the resistance fighters were starving and many were dying because of hunger and diseases. Disturbed by the heavy casualties they suffered in their aggressive assaults, the Japanese turned to a strategy of attrition.

Meanwhile, some of the guerrillas and their families opted to stay behind in the Bato-Bato area owing to their familiarity with the terrain. They felt they had better chances of survival there than moving out to an unknown territory where food was not even assured. Those who decided to stay behind avoided contact with the enemy. Most of them were former farmers and homesteaders.

More Freedom Fighters fell sick because of constant hunger and exposure to the elements. I was among those pulled out of combat duty on the second week of fighting because of my incessant coughing. I was sent to the jungle hospital, which was jampacked with patients stricken with malaria, dysentery, pneumonia and malnutrition as well as those wounded in battle. There I met some of the men whom I thought had become casualties of war, including Lt. Maut, the battalion adjutant who was with me at the command post during the first week of the massive invasion. We occupied the same hut in the jungle hospital.

In this hospital there was no medicine, only rest for the patients. Even food was a rarity and when available consisted of a small scoop of cassava and sometimes a piece of dried fish (which was more often than not spoiled).

One morning, the patients were asked to decide whether they wanted to stay behind in the "hospital" or take the risk of moving out to Suka Bulan where food "might" still be available. Half of the patients decided to go, the other half said they'd rather stay put.

Maut and I felt we had enough strength to make it through the two-day trek across thickly wooded areas and rough terrain. Since it was already rainy season, we were constantly drenched as we trudged along slippery trails and hills. Several of us barely made it across the swollen Malum River as we drifted too far afield before finally making it to the other side. Not a few fell into murky waters while balancing on logs bridging tributaries. There were also dangerous ravines to negotiate, and we had to cling to vines and sprigs for dear life. Often, we stepped on mounds inhabited by ferocious black ants which swarmed on our legs and arms in quick retaliation. The entire march was an ordeal.

On the third day, we got the pleasant news that we were already within the vicinity of Suka Bulan. But disappointment also gripped us after we received word that the enemy had just attacked the area and destroyed all the food crops. Our only consolation was the narratives about the guerrillas' exploits that made the Japanese pay a stiff price for their intrusion.

While we camped at the jungle outskirts of Suka Bulan, S-4 personnel brought enough biamban for everyone. We didn't go through the hellish march for nothing, after all. In fact, everybody was rewarded with two pieces of biamban that day. "Not bad," I said to myself. It was the first time in two weeks that we had something filling to eat.

## Chapter V **The Sulu Area Command's Trials**

### **A Poignant Meeting in the Jungle**

**I**n the bivouac area, I learned from an S-2 runner that Capt. Young and his radio unit were about half a mile away from us. My brother, Sgt. Romulo Espaldon, was on the team. Young's group was proceeding to Sowang Batang in a couple of hours. I asked the runner to tell my brother that I wanted to meet him halfway, pointing to the tallest visible tree from our resting place. I immediately walked towards the tree after the runner had left, not even sure if Mulo would get the message. I hadn't seen him for several months and was so eager to be with him, even briefly.

I anxiously waited at the base of the tree. Soon, I saw a thin figure approaching. It was Mulo. We had so little time, yet so much to talk about—our family, our own life in the resistance, the uncertainties of the times, our plans and our fate in the movement or what to do should one or both of us get killed. One thing was certain, though. We both missed our parents and younger sisters and brothers terribly. Then we prayed together for our safety as well as that of our family who were living in an enemy-ruled territory.

Soon he had to go as his unit would be moving out shortly to avoid capture by the Japanese, who were still in the vicinity. I wanted to cry as we bade each other goodbye, but I held back my tears. I didn't want to show him my weak side. I also thought about our father, a stern disciplinarian who hated to see his children get soft. My heart sank as my brother left. I was certain the feeling was mutual. He did not even look back. I watched him walk away until I lost sight of him as he faded in the woods. I lingered on and continued praying.

Darkness sets in earlier in the jungle; the air also gets terribly cold and humid. It was getting chilly and I had to put my hands in my pockets to keep them warm. As I continued to commune with the Divine Almighty, my attention was distracted by a tiny object I felt in my pocket. I

took it out and held it against the ray of light filtering through the thick leafy canopy. I was enthralled and my heart beat faster as I looked at the tiny thing which I had with me all the time, but which I had completely forgotten about. It was a tiny metal crucifix—just the thing I needed most for divine protection. The Holy Spirit must have descended upon me as I found myself kneeling on the moist ground. I looked towards the direction my brother took, half expecting him to be there. Then I slowly got up and walked back to the bivouac area. Throughout the war, I carried that little cross with me.

### Tapikan

*Tapikan* is a wild palm which for many of us who decided to hold out in the jungles of Tawi-Tawi during the massive enemy assault, was one of the reasons we survived. The "heart" of the palm, we found out, was edible. Although somewhat bitter and acrid, it satisfied our hunger and gave us strength as we trudged northward to scrounge for food in old abandoned farms. The leaves of this wild palm were used for roofing our makeshift jungle huts, its midribs for flooring.

When military pressure against us finally lifted after a three-month campaign as a result of recent enemy reverses in other theaters of conflict, particularly the Battle of the Philippine Sea, the guerrilla warriors who survived the three-month massive enemy attack and siege became known as the "Tapikan Guerrillas." It became a status symbol—of warriors who fought and fought bravely, persevered, and passed the test for survival.

To the civilians, new recruits and volunteers, the Tapikan Guerrillas became a symbol of heroism and were looked up to with awe and with much reverence. Even to the enemy, the puppet officials and their supporters, what these Tapikan Guerrillas had gone through was looked upon with disbelief. Of over a thousand Freedom Fighters that dared to face the massive enemy assaults that started on 12 April 1944, less than 200 were able to answer the call when the order to regroup was made three months later.

Many stood their ground in encounters and were gunned down, some were captured and beheaded. Others surrendered and were killed or died a thousand deaths in humiliation. Many more died from hunger, starvation and diseases, and lay in unmarked graves, unsung.

Pvt. Makling Baguinda joined his brother-in-law, Sgt. Amman Mushiba, during the retreat. Makling died of starvation and disease and

Amman alone in the jungle agonized as he buried his companion in a shallow grave. Sgt. Primitivo Quijano, frail and sickly, died of starvation as he shared all the food he found, with his sister, Emerita Maut, and her daughter, as they retreated together in the jungle. There were scores of Maklings and Quijanos during those most difficult and trying days.

Having failed to effect the surrender or capture of Col. Suarez, the Japanese placed a high price on his head. The offer was disseminated all over Sulu. The enemy believed that with the elimination of Col. Suarez, the guerrilla movement would collapse.

They even tried food poisoning on him but to no avail. Although the commander was fully confident about his men's loyalty, he still got his most trusted allies for his and his family's personal security. The inner core of his security group in his deep jungle hideout were Suarez's half-brother, Lt. Engracio Gulligado, Lt. Maximiliano Velasquez, his brother-in-law Sgt. Saituan Tan, another relative of his wife, Lt. Gua Lee, and a squad of Muslim fighters. The outer security consisted of Sgts. Roque Flores and Emeterio Ylanan (who was formerly a homesteader) and a squad of handpicked men.

During the fighting in Suka Bulan, the colonel left his jungle headquarters to personally direct operations. However, he had a recurrence of malaria compounded by dysentery with bouts of diarrhea. With no food and medicines, he became so dehydrated he could hardly move.

When he failed to return to his hideout at the designated time, Lt. Gulligado and his men traced his trail and found him almost dead. Gulligado placed him in a hammock and had him gently taken back to his hideout where his wife patiently nursed him back to health. Except for his immediate family and security unit, no one else was privy to his serious condition.

During this critical period the fate of the guerrilla movement hung in the balance. Meanwhile, Capt. Velasquez, Suarez's most trusted ally, continued to issue orders in Suarez's name and ably kept the forces intact and going.

### **Tawi-Tawi Cordoned With Garrisons**

Upon reaching the jungle outskirts of Suka Bulan, Lt. Maut and I learned of the collapse of the guerrilla defense in the area. Col. Suarez thus gave orders for the guerrillas to regroup into smaller units, again,



for better chances of survival. They were also ordered to avoid contact with the enemy.

Maut and I decided to stick together. We detoured around Suka Bulan and proceeded to Siratang to forage for food, only to find there was none. Other troops, we found out, also did the same, prompting them to go together to the western side of Tawi-Tawi. The group included Lt. Kaluang and 10 of his men. "Ka Ingal" as we intimately called the good officer, was the unanimous choice as the leader of that band of weak, sickly and hungry guerrillas. Our group of about 50 men trudged northward to Sowang Batang where we were told about the presence of abandoned farms.

At Sowang Batang, no food could be found. Other units had beaten us to it. But there I met Lt. Abdulmuin Imao, the youngest of the Imao brothers. He decided we should move out. We marched for days with nothing to eat. Imao confided to me his plan to flee to Jolo where he had several relatives ready to help him. He planned to remain there incognito until conditions had improved, then return to Tawi-Tawi.

I can still vividly remember him dressed in tattered shirt and short pants made of brown rice sackcloth. With his two companions, he pulled a big canoe in one of Sowang Batang's streams on their way out to the open sea. Lt. Abdulmuin Imao never had the chance to come back to Tawi-Tawi. He was captured on Bentaolan island, brought to Jolo and beheaded in public.

In spite of our predicament, practically nobody thought of giving up. The Japanese high command in Tawi-Tawi then cordoned the main Tawi-Tawi island with garrisons and sent patrols crisscrossing on search-and-destroy operations.

At least 16 Japanese garrisons were set up in Tawi-Tawi, each manned by anywhere from 50 to 300 troops. The main garrisons were in Bakong Simunul, Bas-Bas, Ping-Ping and Tong Sumagat which had 50 men each; Cawa-Cawa, Languyan, Maraning, South Ubian, Sowang Batang, Suka Bulan, and Tandubas with 100 men each; and Balimbing, Bas-Bas, Tarawakan and Tumahobong, with 200 apiece; and Bato-Bato, 300.

Some 1,000 Japanese troops were reported to be securing their airfield in Sanga-Sanga. In Bongao, there were over 5,000 Japanese marines and naval personnel. A network of fortified caves, bunkers and pillboxes (box-like fortifications which can usually accommodate up to

a dozen men) dotted the island. Big gun emplacements were concealed among the rocky hillsides. Lining the coastal areas were machine gun nests, 20 mm. cannons and concrete pillboxes.

Tawi-Tawi had a vital role in the Japanese naval strategy which we were not aware of then. All we knew was that they were obsessed with demolishing us and they had the manpower and materiel to do it.

### **Lt. Abdulmuin Imao**

Abdulmuin was the youngest of the Imao brothers, and one of the original members of the "Fighting 21," the first organized guerrilla unit that landed in Siasi on 25 December 1942. The Fighting 21 was under the command of his older brother, Lt. Abdulrahim Imao. Later, the eldest of the brothers, Abdulhalim, also joined the guerrillas.

The Imao brothers belonged to the fierce Tausug tribe of Jolo island. Their father, a brave Tausug warrior, was named Halimao Tunggal, literally meaning "The Lone Tiger." When Halimao Tunggal's sons Abdulhalim, Abdulrahim and Abdulmuin were in grade school, they were among the most unruly pupils and were always involved in fistfights at the Jolo Central School. Their behavior became such a problem that higher school authorities had to step in.

The Imao issue was brought to the attention of Mr. Edward M. Kuder, Superintendent of Schools in Sulu. Mr. Kuder, a kind American gentleman, called in the older Imao, Halimao Tunggal, and after some discussions advised that it would probably be in the interest of the boys if their surname were changed from Halimao, meaning tiger, to Imao. The older man agreed and this was how the surname Imao came about.

In the Sulu guerrilla movements, the three brothers were in the forefront and were among the most aggressive fighters in the organization. All became officers.

At the height of the massive assaults aimed at annihilating the guerrillas of Tawi-Tawi that started in April 1944, the Freedom Fighters took a severe beating. Col. Suarez had to give orders for his troops to break into smaller groups to give them a better chance to survive.

Abdulmuin decided to lie low and join his pregnant wife and ailing parents in Bentaolan island 50 miles to the north. He tried to keep himself incognito in Bentaolan but the island being small, the Japanese secret police, the Kempei tai soon learned of his presence. One night, they surrounded his house and demanded his surrender. He could have

resisted, as he was armed, but chose not to because his wife was pregnant and his parents were old and sick. He had hoped he would get mercy. But Lt. Abdulmuin Imao was taken to Jolo and it was not long before the Japanese authorities learned that he belonged to the Imao clan and was an original member of the Fighting 21. He was therefore sentenced to death and scheduled for beheading.

His wife, a beautiful Chinese mestiza, became an attraction to the Japanese commander, who took a serious interest in her.

On the day of the public execution, Abdulmuin was ordered to dig his own grave and was asked to kneel beside the pit. With one sweep of his sword, the Japanese commander beheaded the brave guerrilla warrior and pushed his body into the pit.

His pregnant wife, who was forced to witness the execution, ran and jumped into the pit, holding on tight to her husband's body and refusing to leave. Mercilessly, the Japanese shot her, and assured that the couple shared a grave. The older Imao and his ailing wife were likewise beheaded by the Japanese butcher.

### **The Radio Unit**

The radio outfit was a vital unit of the Sulu Area Command. In June 1943, spirits soared among the ranks of the underground movement with the arrival by submarine of Capt. Frank Young, who brought with him transceivers from the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Australia. Young was a native of Sulu, born of an American father and Tausug mother.

The guerrillas used these transceivers to send vital intelligence information to GHQ Australia regarding enemy troop concentration as well as sea and air movements in Sulu, British North Borneo and the Celebes. (Among those assisting Capt. Young during this critical period were Sgt. Romulo Espaldon, Sgt. Addak Asmad, Sgt. Washington Strattan, Pfc. Muhiddin Asmad and Pvt. Abdulracid Pailan.)

At that time, the Sibutu Channel was a beehive of naval activities. The intelligence reports sent by Young and his unit resulted in the sinking by submarine of hundreds of thousands of Japanese shipping tonnage and scores of transport ships loaded with enemy troops bound for the battlefronts in the southwest Pacific.

For these reasons, the mobile radio station was a prime target for destruction by the enemy; its personnel were on top of the wanted list.

Young and his men, however, were constantly on the move and always just a few steps ahead of the enemy.

One vital piece of information sent to GHQ Australia by the radio unit may have led to a decisive Allied naval victory. During the guerrilla retreat of May 1944 the Sulu Freedom Fighters, heading northwest, spotted on the southwestern horizon a Japanese armada—Vice-Admiral Ozawa's fleet of 59 warships: 9 aircraft carriers, 5 battleships, cruisers, destroyers and tankers. Ozawa's fleet was hiding in Tawi-Tawi, waiting for the right moment to engage the American fleet in the A-GO Plan.

This information was immediately relayed by Col. Suarez to Capt. Young for transmission to GHQ Australia, which radioed back:

Imperative you use every resource to observe enemy fleet and report its departure.

The American invasion of Saipan had begun. Transport ships loaded with troops for the invasion of Guam were on their way. But when the Tawi-Tawi radio reported on the Japanese fleet lifting anchor on 13 June and steaming north, the U.S. naval headquarters in Hawaii ordered the Guam bound transports to return to Pearl Harbor and Kwajalein Island. Admiral Ozawa was expecting to sink helpless transport ships, but instead encountered the formidable U.S. Task Force 58.

The clash between Ozawa's fleet and the U.S. Task Force 58 in what was later called The Battle of the Philippine Sea took place 19-20 June 1944, and ended in a resounding victory for the Americans. A message from Task Force 58 sent immediately after the battle read:

After surprising the enemy force on 19 June Task Force sank three aircraft carriers, two oil tankers, damaged one battleship and three cruisers and destroyed about 400 aircraft.

General Stephen M. Mellnick, who was on the staff of General Douglas MacArthur in Australia, wrote in his book *Philippine War Diary 1939-1945*:

A remote guerrilla radio at Tawi-Tawi flashed a message to GHQ and thereby contributed to a major Japanese naval defeat. The scene opens in May 1944 . . . GHQ had no information about the enemy force at Tawi-Tawi. Our submarines could not loiter in the area because of aggressive enemy

destroyers, and our reconnaissance aircraft were destroyed or chased away by scores of carrier based planes. Yet it was vital for GHQ to know where the enemy was and what it was doing.

Mellnick concludes:

Though the guerrillas can take only peripheral credit for this important victory, it is interesting to speculate on what might have happened if Tawi-Tawi had not flashed that warning message. Lacking time to deploy for battle, our navy might not have achieved surprise; and had it continued the Guam operation, it might have lost many transports. There is little doubt that the guerrillas at this point in time and space contributed significantly to the navy's victory.\*

### **Ambuta**

During the constant evacuation and evasive movements made by Capt. Young and his radio unit, he depended much on one key man for the safety of the radio equipment. This man was "Ambuta," whose real name was Abdulrasid Pailan, a private with the guerrilla force. Because he was partially blind, Ambuta was the nickname given to him by the group. "Buta" is a Tausug word for blind.

Although he was unschooled and a deaf mute, Ambuta's greatest asset was his physical power. He had the strength of a bull. He was short, stocky, about 5' 2" but with a huge frame and walked with a crouching gait. Everyone was kind to him because he was obedient and never complained. His task was to carry the radio transmitter in a large backpack. He was aware of his very important responsibility and was proud of it.

The long trudge in the jungle with the heavy equipment on his back, along rugged and slippery terrain was pure physical agony. During any emergency when the unit had to move out on short notice because of an impending enemy attack or approach, Ambuta would instinctively grab his vital equipment and move on. And these were during the days when food was no longer available; everyone was hungry and weak.

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\* Stephen M. Millnick, *Philippine War Dairy, 1939-1945*, revised edition (N. Y.: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company), pp. 320-21.

One day during the escape to Suka Bulan after a long period without food, the radio group came upon an abandoned sugarcane field. Ambuta immediately put down the precious load from his back and proceeded to the middle of the small canefield. The rest of the group stayed along its fringe. After a short rest, and as they got ready to move on, they realized that Ambuta was missing. A frantic search was done and they found him taking a leisurely nap. The area around him looked like a bulldozed section of the sugarcane field, with piles of cane pulp several feet high.

Ambuta survived the war and was always proud of the role he played in helping save the radio equipment. Unknown to him, however, was his role in helping send to the bottom of the sea hundreds of thousands of enemy shipping tonnage by submarine action.

### **Retreat to Northern Tawi-Tawi**

At Sowang Batang, there were about a dozen small groups of guerrillas that had gathered and decided to cross the mountain range through dense forest to reach Maraning on the western side of Tawi-Tawi. During better times, Maraning had been a good source of food for us. Maut and I belonged to one of the small units that had combined to make a bigger group of about 60 men. Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang was generally accepted as the leader of these loose groups of gaunt and ghostly men.

Badgered by uncertainties, hunger and diseases, we trekked in a northwest direction scrounging for food along the way while evading enemy patrols. Trudging through dense terrain of matted vegetation, constantly threatened by enemy attacks, we moved slowly on slippery trails. After two days of slow trek over hazardous hills, some of the weak and ailing sought permission to take a longer rest. When they failed to catch up with us, Lt. Kalingalan sent two of our stronger men to look for those left behind who found and reported on the dead along the trail. The dead were buried in shallow unmarked graves.

After a few days, we reached the opposite of the mountain range. Most of us did not know the geography of this part of the island. Reaching the coast, we came across a long stretch of mangrove trees. Our progress was again slow and laborious. For hours, we found ourselves balancing and holding on to roots of mangroves, often slipping and getting stuck in deep, sticky, foul-smelling mud. Then we came to a coastal

edge that jutted into the deep sea. We had to climb and hold on to sharp rocks, vines, twisted roots to negotiate the promontory. It was an ordeal, for we were famished.

Worn out and weakened by hunger, we finally reached Maraning only to discover that the village was garrisoned by a strong well-fed enemy force of 200. We also found out that the old farms in Maraning were all barren as villagers had evacuated weeks before. We bypassed the place and proceeded to Cawa-Cawa which was about four miles away. Suspecting the village to be likewise garrisoned by the enemy, we trudged on along the forest edge.

Finally, and for the first time in months, we came out of the jungle to the clearing with ricefields ready for harvest. There was excitement in our group. We approached farm huts to meet the farmers. The first open hut I entered must have been owned by a relatively successful farmer. He had just returned from Jolo and brought out fresh mangoes to offer me. Soon, Sgt. Nain Usman came by and was also invited to partake of the fruits. We found out later that the farmer was scared of the presence of hungry guerrillas but we eventually succeeded in erasing that fear. Sgt. Usman, a former chief of police in Siet Lake in Jolo island, was a politician and it was an education for me to watch him endear himself to our new host.

Meanwhile, Maut befriended another farmer whose name was Mohammad Sali. Sali was kind and trustworthy. In the following days he not only supplied us with cassava and fish but also informed us about Japanese activities in the village.

In Cawa-Cawa, a heartwarming occasion took place. Lt. Maut and his wife, Emerita, and their baby had a tearful but happy reunion. The family had been separated for several weeks since the enemy attack on Bato-Bato. Emerita joined her sickly brother, Pfc. Primitivo Quijano, who retreated with the first group that evacuated towards Suka Bulan a few weeks earlier. Frail, hungry and with the added responsibility of caring for and sharing his food with his sister and niece, Primitivo died of illness and starvation in the jungle. This left Emerita and her baby daughter with no choice but to join other evacuees. She and her daughter became sick, the latter's body covered with sores.

A farmer and his wife took pity on mother and child, brought them under their care and gave them shelter in a hut. Lt. Maut never mentioned his family's predicament during our retreat but I realized the agony he went through. My respect for him soared.

In the days that followed the enemy dispatched patrols to the farms but the villagers notified us in advance about them. Although we took all precautions to conceal our presence, it was not long before the enemy started to suspect unwanted visitors on the farms. They became harsh and brutal toward the villagers. Some were tortured but they continued to deny any knowledge of guerrillas in their farms.

Then one day, Mohammad Sali advised us that a strong enemy patrol was coming to inspect their farms. We immediately destroyed all our makeshift huts along the edge of the forest, then positioned ourselves along the road ready to ambush the enemy should they harm the farmers. We saw the Japanese patrol of about fifty men approaching Mohammad Sali's farm. We could have easily taken them all but we feared that the reprisals on the civilians would have been unimaginable. Guiding the patrol was Mohammad Sali. "What were all these dismantled huts for in the forest?" the Japanese commander asked. "These were used for evacuation when Japanese planes started strafing us while working on our farms," Mohammad Sali answered. There were more questions asked but they could not pin Mohammad Sali down. He denied the insinuations that he and other farmers were hiding some guerrillas. The enemy patrol left but its leader was not fully convinced.

To protect the civilians from further harsh enemy treatment and even death, we decided to make a sacrifice and move out. The villagers had been kind to us, gave us two weeks of rest on their farms and supplied us with adequate food. We had to reciprocate by saving them from Japanese reprisals.

After thanking our kind hosts, most of the guerrilla units started to move out and go farther north to Languyan six miles away. It was reported that food might still be available in that area but the approach by land was hazardous. Some moved ahead and trekked through the thick jungle while others hugged close to the coast line.

One morning on the trek northwest, we woke up and saw the biggest surprise of our lives. On the southwestern horizon was a great fleet of Japanese warships—the same force that Admiral Ozawa intended to use to attack the U.S. naval forces, we later learned. Our radio unit lost no time in sending its report to GHQ Australia.

### **Escape to Bas-Bas Island**

With Mrs. Maut and the baby now with us, our strategy had to take



them into consideration. Trekking along with the rest of the troop through unexplored jungle and rough terrain was out of the question. Maut, a native of Sibaud, Siasi, 80 miles away, discussed his plan with me. He confided that he could get some fishermen in Bas-Bas Island to notify his relatives in his home island to fetch us. In Sibaud, he assured me, we could get lost among the fishermen of the island, many of whom were his relatives. We would lie low until the situation improved. His plan had merit and I went along with it. We discussed the plan with Mohammad Sali one afternoon. He was one person we could always trust with our secrets. The farmer agreed it was a viable plan and promised to help us.

During his visit to the farmhouse the next day, Sali informed us that he had placed a dugout canoe covered with coconut leaves under a jackfruit tree about 200 yards from the northern end of the village. There were Japanese guards in several outposts in the village. That night, Maut and I cautiously made it to the shore and located the canoe. We were emotionally overwhelmed because Mohammad Sali not only had the boat ready but had loaded supplies of steamed cassava called *puto*, fried fish and coconuts in the canoe. How kind and thoughtful of him! Maut went back for his wife and daughter who were waiting not too far away.

After pushing the boat quietly to the water we started boarding it. The boat could barely accept the weight of four people so we had to unload some of the coconuts. The night was pitch black as we paddled away northwards. Because of the ebbing tide, we soon were forced to paddle beyond the reef where the sea was choppy. Mrs. Maut and I spent most of our time bailing out water to keep the canoe afloat. The child was shivering and I wrapped her gently in my tattered blanket. We were lucky the current was going in our direction. We paddled the whole night. It was chilly but Maut and I were drenched with sweat.

As we neared the channel separating the northernmost tip of Tawi-Tawi and the island of Bas-Bas, the eastern sky started to brighten. The mouth of the channel was about a mile wide and the swift current was flowing outward to the open sea. We were very tired but we had to negotiate the channel before daybreak.

Approaching the village on its western end, we saw the silhouette of a wooden bridge jutting to the channel for about 50 yards. Exhausted and sleepy, we were tempted to tie our boat to the wooden jetty and wait for daylight. On second thought, I suggested that we paddle farther into the village proper and Lt. Maut agreed.

Houses were on stilts and above the water. Near the center of the village, Maut, who was guiding the canoe at the stern, headed for one of the houses. Silently, I tied our boat to a ladder that extended down to the sea below. The occupants must have been light sleepers because soon someone up in the house accosted us. We identified ourselves as fishermen and asked permission to be allowed to stay until daylight. The man came down the ladder to look us over. Seeing us armed he suspected we were guerrillas. To our pleasant surprise we found out that he was a brother-in-law of one of our guerrilla comrades, Lt. Sabtal Usman. He gave his name as Morocco and hurriedly assisted Emerita and the baby up the ladder. He kindly offered dry blankets to keep them warm. Our conversation was hushed.

Morocco informed us there was a garrison of 200 Japanese soldiers in the village and that their barracks was at the foot of a long bridge that jutted into the channel. Maut and I looked at each other as Morocco gave us the information.

In the grey of dawn before anyone in the neighborhood was up, Morocco led Maut and me to his farm to avoid suspicion by the neighbors. Emerita and the baby were left with Morocco's wife. On his farm, about two kilometers away and overlooking the channel, he led us to a half-completed, dilapidated hut where we could take shelter. He assured us he would be back with food and water before sundown. He handed us a package of leftover fish and cassava for our midday meal.

That day, as a precaution, we did not take advantage of the hut, but stayed instead in the forest edge with the hut in view. At sunset, we left our hiding place, explored the area and even went along the edge of the cliff overlooking the village. To our surprise, we found out that we were just about half a kilometer above the Japanese barracks. We saw Japanese troops moving around and even identified the long jetty below.

The sun had just set and we proceeded to an area close to the trail but away from the designated rendezvous to wait for Morocco. We were cautious because Japanese troops or informers could be trailing Morocco. Instead of seeing him, we saw his wife. She was shouting and pretending to drive away monkeys and wild animals. Darkness had now veiled the sun. She passed our rendezvous but failed to see us and was about to return when we made our presence known. She brought us food and cautioned us about pro-Japanese informers in the village. She advised us

to keep our presence unnoticed. She assured us that Mrs. Maut and the baby were well-cared for. There was still enough light for her way home.

### **Scare of a Lifetime**

We ate quickly. The sun had now set. Maut and I moved towards the hut. We gathered fresh leaves and laid them on the ground. The hut had no flooring. The roof gave us some shelter, but sleep was impossible, as hungry mosquitoes were plentiful. To kill those on my exposed extremities all I had to do was to make a sweep of my hand on my arms and legs. It was just like scooping dirt. I have never experienced such an onslaught of these thirsty, blood-sucking parasites.

There was another reason for my insomnia. An unexplained apprehension had engulfed me. It was still dark and I was still trying to doze off when Maut tapped me and suggested that we move out to the edge of the jungle some 50 meters away. Maut must have also failed to get any sleep.

He grabbed his carbine and small pack and headed for the forest. I was still trying to catch a short nap but I got up, rolled my tattered blanket, picked up my gun and followed him to the wooded area. I was about 10 meters from the forest edge when a sudden noise broke the stillness of the night. I heard loud voices behind me. Instinctively, I crouched and turned. Rushing towards the hut were over a dozen armed Japanese soldiers. Failing to catch their intended victims, they fanned towards the clearing, some approaching my position. They were talking loudly in Japanese.

I froze. Movement would have divulged my location. It was still dark, although the eastern sky was starting to brighten up. Fallen logs, bushes and tree stumps helped camouflage my position against the dark forest background. I must have been mistaken for a bush or a tree stump. Failing to find anyone in the hut, enemy troops swarmed the clearing, some coming so close that I could literally hear their labored breathing, as they scanned the forest edge. The nearest one could have stumbled on me had he made a few more steps towards the forest. Had he looked down, he could not have missed me. But while his gun was pointed toward the forest, mine was directly pointed at his heart. I hugged the weapon, and my finger was on the trigger, ready to spew lethal lead. He would not have lived a second longer had he found me.

Every time the Japanese soldiers closest to me turned their backs or looked away from me, I inched backwards towards the forest, in a crouch. I was fully aware that any unnecessary movement, a break of a twig or a flap of a bird could catch their attention. But if I was to have even a fighting chance, I had to reach the forest.

As I inched my way backwards, a large, long log blocked my withdrawal. I waited for the proper time and soon I was behind the log with my eyes still fixed on the enemies, who were still searching. I dropped to the ground only to find Maut beside me. All the while he had watched what was going on, his gun aimed at the enemy soldier closest to me. Had the enemy discovered me, I would have felled a few of them and Maut could have covered my escape.

Having missed their intended victims, the Japanese soldiers left, still arguing heatedly among themselves. It was a close call.

Maut and I deduced that the enemy troops saw us that afternoon as we briefly went to the edge of the clearing overlooking the enemy barracks below. In retrospect, it was a foolish thing to do, with our firearms slung on our shoulders. That day we moved deeper into the jungle but by dusk we ventured closer to our rendezvous.

We saw Morocco approach. We allowed him to pass. Seeing no one following him, we revealed our presence. He did not bring any food but instead came to fetch us. "I was so worried because I learned of the enemy's early patrol today," Morocco said in the vernacular. "I am going to bring you to a safer hiding place in the main island across the channel," he continued. We went with him as he led us to a canoe supplied with food.

Morocco's wife arrived shortly after with Mrs. Maut and the baby. Morocco paddled us for two hours across the Bas-Bas channel to a cove. As we disembarked, he led us to a small hut where he advised us to stay for the night. He promised to return by daybreak to take us to a place farther inland where it would be even safer. For the next five days, he did not visit us to avoid suspicion. At the end of that period he brought us back to the hut close to the cove's bank.

Morocco also brought the good news that Lt. Maut's relatives from Sibaud had arrived to take Mrs. Maut and daughter back to Sibaud. Maut had arranged for Morocco to contact Maut's brother in Sibaud through some fishermen. With his wife and daughter now with his relatives, Lt. Maut was greatly relieved.

## The Jungle and Its Mysteries

Late in May 1945, the Bas-Bas garrison was reinforced and its strength grew to 300 men. The Japanese received information that retreating guerrilla troops had concentrated in northern Tawi-Tawi because of the availability of food. Morocco also informed us that pro-Japanese informers had tipped the Japanese off on our presence in the Bas-Bas area.

Taking no chances, Morocco decided that Maut and I should go into hiding again deep in the thick jungle of northern Tawi-Tawi. From Bas-Bas island, he paddled us to another cove and dropped us at its bank. He supplied us with seven steamed cassavas. Morocco promised to fetch us in a week. After he left, we followed an old trail now reclaimed by the jungle. Hiking for 10 minutes we detoured in a westerly direction and moved farther into the thickly wooded jungle. We reasoned that should Morocco be captured and forced to guide the enemy to our hideout, he would not even know where to look.

It was midday but the jungle looked dark. The thick foliage prevented much of the sunlight from filtering through. We decided to build a hut to protect us from the damp earth and from rain. Morocco had advised us that there were wild boars, snakes and poisonous insects in the area. We decided to build our hut at the base of a tall tree. We had gone through the mechanics of building huts in the jungle many times before and this had become an easy task.

While Maut went to gather vines and tapikan leaves for roofing and walling, and its midribs for flooring, I started to cut wood and sticks for the post and framework some 30 meters away. As I gathered the cut wood and returned to the big tree which was just nearby, I could not find my way back. I made several attempts and each time I did, the area looked different. The big tree I used as my reference was of no help because most of the trees around appeared big. This baffled me. I called for Maut, who I knew was not far away, but I received no reply. I was getting exasperated because I knew I was within the vicinity of our big tree. Then something dawned on me.

I remembered a boyhood story I had heard many times. The story goes that people of the earth called *kokok* become playful and like to play tricks on mortals in the jungle. They say that *kokok* can confuse humans and make them lose direction. However, the story continues, when one finds himself in this predicament all he has to do is to remove his cloth-

ing and go naked. This will embarrass the kokok and put a stop to their mischief. I soon found myself removing my clothes and was half naked when suddenly I saw Maut. His pile of tapikan fronds was just close by. My pile of cut wood was just 30 meters away from the big tree.

"I called for you but you never replied," I told him.

"I never heard your call. I did not go farther than where I am now," he assured me.

This experience has amused me and up to this time, I have not fully discounted the presence of kokok in the jungle. Fortunately, there is that antidote for the tricks they play. It worked for me once.

While we were hiding in this jungle, Japanese troops in a barge visited the cove and raked the area with machine gun fire. They returned two days later and landed some troops to search for us, but our hideout proved too difficult to locate. Our friends in Bas-Bas told us later that a certain local leader, Hatib Boni from Bas-Bas, reported our presence in the area to the Japanese. The villagers were infuriated as they told us of Hatib Boni's pro-Japanese leanings. They wanted him punished.

Maut and I then learned that Hatib Boni had two cows on a small island about five miles away. With some friendly villagers leading the way, Maut and I went to the island and killed one of his cows. We distributed the meat among the villagers, and sent the message to Boni that the next bullet would be for him. Hatib Boni escaped to South Ubian when the Japanese withdrew their Bas-Bas garrison two weeks later. Boni never returned to Bas-Bas island until after the war.













and followers of Capt. Tome Biteng. But when they learned that Maut was a guerrilla officer and I was a noncommissioned officer, they opened up and gave us information. They finally even guided us to the strong hold Strattans.

The Captain and his family were happy to see us. We also visited the Bitengs and the Youngs in their highly secret quarters. We were informed that three kumpit loaded with food were always ready to move out should their position be endangered.

We found out that Maut's brother-in-law, Faustino, was still in the Suka Bulan area. An hour after our arrival, Mulo and Ting (Washington) Strattan came in with strings of fish and baskets of sea shells. They had gone on a fishing trip the night before, using dry coconut leaves for a torch.

I was happy to see my brother. He had been with the radio unit since the S-2 section retreated from Bato-Bato. I invited him to join me in Bas-Bas but he declined the offer because he was the intelligence man attached to Capt. Young and the radio unit. Mulo promised to follow us to Bas-Bas at a later date. Maut and I were happy to share the food supplies we brought with the Strattans, the Youngs and the Bitengs.

### **Crucial Mission**

In the later part of May 1944, relentless enemy pressure forced the guerrilla forces to break up into smaller groups and avoid any contact with the enemy. They were confronted with three enemies, namely, Japanese patrols, starvation and disease.

With the guerrillas going in smaller groups to forage for food, there was less chance of encountering enemy patrols. The guerrilla forces had by now spread out to the four winds. While a greater number of the groups had gravitated to the northern part of Tawi-Tawi, some, who had families, remained in the Bato-Bato area because of their familiarity with the terrain, many of them having been homesteaders and farmers. But others, had moved south within the vicinity of Luuk Tulay even if the village was close to the strong Tarawakan Japanese garrison.

The bottom line for choosing an area to move into was the presence of food supplies. Safety from enemy patrols was a secondary consideration.

The unit that chose to stay in the vicinity of Luuk Tulay, three miles away from the enemy garrison at Tarawakan, was the guerrilla force under Lt. Agustin Datiles. He and his men were the original warriors from Jolo town and Luuk. Being veteran fighters of the Luuk campaign, where they were decimated from relentless enemy attacks a year earlier, they dared to take more risks and stayed in the Luuk Tulay area.

When food started to become scarce, and the order from Col. Suarez to break up into smaller groups, Lt. Datiles was forced to move out and regroup in small units.

The son of the group commander, 2nd Lt. Bonifacio Datiles, was confronted with the agony of deciding whether to join his friends and former classmates, or join his father. One of the first officers to break away was Lt. Calvin Navata. Joining him were Sgt. Antonio (Tony) Viray and Cpl. Anastacio (Chit) Bautista.

Lt. Bonifacio (Boning) Datiles wanted to join this group since they were his closest friends, but was torn between joining them or his father. It was time for his father's group to move on and Boning reluctantly started to follow. Several times he looked back at his comrades with tears running down his cheeks. Life was bleak in the jungle then and the future was uncertain. After some agonizing moments, he walked in the direction of his father who at this time was now swallowed up by the jungle.

A week later, Lt. Agustin Datiles and his men had an encounter with a stronger enemy patrol. The starving guerrillas lost several good men.

Lt. Calvin Navata, while foraging for food and evading enemy patrols, thought of a mission for his small group. He decided to seek out Col. Suarez and make himself and his men available for whatever plans the colonel had about the guerrilla movement now in its darkest hour. However, of the few people that Navata had contact with in the jungle, no one knew of Suarez's whereabouts. It was like the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack and while the "needle" stood a shade below six feet, the haystack was the entire island of Tawi-Tawi.

On the second day of the search, while following a jungle trail, Navata and his companions heard voices close behind and this turned out to be a large Japanese patrol from Tarawakan. Hurriedly, they got off the trail and tried to put as much distance as they could from the enemy. But they ran smack into a jungle bog. Trapped between the enemy and that quagmire, they realized that it was about the end of the

road for them. They had only one option left—to fight. If they had to go, they would rather go down fighting.

Navata hurriedly got all his BAR magazines out of the pouch and laid them in front of him for easy access. Tony and Chit did the same with their carbine clips, and waited in their concealed position. Under the circumstances, however, discretion was the better part of valor. They held their fire and just watched the enemy chattering and laughing as they passed not more than twenty-five yards away. Even the two tracking dogs the enemy brought along failed to pick up the guerrillas' scent.

The guerrillas shivered as they imagined themselves decapitated and their heads displayed in Bongao, the enemy naval base, while their bodies were being devoured by wild boars. Indeed it was a close call.

Late in the afternoon that day, they came across a civilian family of five. They were all emaciated. The three children, who could barely move, grabbed the hands of the newcomers begging for food, their eyes sunken and their skin covered with sores. The parents with their three children pleaded with the guerrillas to be taken along. But they were too weak to travel having been reduced to skin and bones by debilitating hunger.

Calvin, Tony, and Chit shared all the meager supplies they had. The starving family was unaware that death was not far away. The inevitable was evident.

By sheer luck and as Providence would have it, on the third day of the search, Navata's group chanced upon someone by a jungle stream fetching water. He turned out to be one of Col. Suarez's orderlies. Thus, the trio was led to the hideout of the Sulu Area Command (SAC) commander. With Col. Suarez were his wife, Dimtoy, his brother-in-law, Lt. Saituan Tan, his half brother, Lt. Engracio Guligado and their families. Also with the group was Lt. Maximiniano Velasquez, the SAC adjutant. Suarez had just recovered from severe malarial attacks and diarrhea which had left him pale, dehydrated, and weak.

Col. Suarez had already made plans to regroup his battered and decimated guerrilla force, now scattered all over Tawi-Tawi. A key figure he wanted to help him implement his plan was Lt. Kalingalan (Ingal) Kaluang. He then gave Navata the order to locate Ingal. "But where is he?" Navata inquired.

"No one knows and I am assigning you to look for him," Suarez replied. Then Col. Suarez added, "That is your mission and it is an order."

Navata thought, "Yes, we found the needle, and the needle said, 'You look for another 'needle.' Great!'"

So off went Navata and his two men, first back to Luuk Tulay to prepare provisions for the mission. The farms at Luuk Tulay were still a source of food for the enterprising and the hungry. Somewhere along the way, a thin brown-haired dog, hungry for human contact, showed up and Navata allowed the new-found friend to join them. Further on, they came upon a guerrilla band. The latter spotted the animal and saw a good meal. They offered to barter some of their cassava for the canine and after some friendly haggling, Navata parted with his dog. The aroma of dog stew was mouth-watering to the starving trio.

An invitation to share in the meal was offered and Navata was tempted to accept, when Tony Viray said, "No, you don't!" It was said sternly to his senior officer, and the latter had to comply.

The trio figured that in their search for Lt. Kaluang it might be some two weeks before they could come across another food source, but following a hunch, they set out in a northwestern direction into the trail-less jungle. On their first day out they passed a crude hut that emitted the familiar stench of a rotting corpse. Peeking inside, Navata barely recognized the body of a friend, all alone, his body starting to decompose. The trio gave the dead man a decent burial in the shallow grave. He was a son of a guerrilla officer.

At another point along the way, the trio was startled as a boar broke out from behind a big tree. They investigated and found an emaciated human corpse in a sitting position, his back leaning against the tree. With his skin-and-bones appearance, he must have also died of starvation. Navata got his bolo. A bolo could be worth its weight in gold in the jungles of Tawi-Tawi at that time. It was a necessary instrument especially for cutting tapikan, a wild palm, for its "heart" which was edible even if bitter and acrid. They left the dead man's cooking pot. It was empty.

Then came a most physically exhausting part of the trio's journey. In the vicinity of Tumahubong, they reached a clearing and thought that crossing it would help them get to the opposite side easily. The decision was a mistake. They got into a maze. The area was a wide abandoned forest clearing with felled logs lying in different directions, one on top of another. Thick underbrush had grown at ground level and was impassable. The only practical way through was by walking on the top-

most fallen timber. But, after scrambling with great effort over several of these, the trio found themselves where they started—back to square one. Thoroughly exhausted, it took them the whole day to negotiate the roughly one-fourth-mile distance and arrived at the opposite side after sundown.

One afternoon, Navata and his men broke out of the jungle into the seashore and then found a source of a good dinner. A four-foot shark was chasing fry in ankle-deep water to the very edge of the beach. The bolo taken from the dead man came in handy. One slash and the man-eating fish lay wiggling in the blood-stained water. A much-needed rest and feast followed.

Around the eleventh day, and to their surprise, they chanced upon a herd of wild pigs in a wallow. As the latter scrambled in all directions, Navata, who was a crack shot, fired three times and missed. He was disappointed, but not for long. Someone in hiding nearby heard the shots and went out to investigate. It was Sgt. Ahmad Bagis, the first living soul they had met in eleven days. Bagis and his group were holed up in the vicinity. And what a pleasant surprise, he also knew where Lt. Kaluang was, and that happened to be not far away! Mission accomplished.

Lt. Navata's mission turned out to be most opportune and crucial. In Lt. Kaluang's group were his kin from Karundung in mainland Jolo. They were all set to leave Tawi-Tawi and escape to Jolo island where they had more relatives to hide them and fight with them. Had Navata arrived a few days later, he would not have succeeded in contacting Lt. Kaluang, and the regrouping of the scattered and decimated guerrilla forces would have been much delayed or, at worst, uncertain.

Among the instructions of Col. Suarez to Lt. Kaluang was for the latter to contact Lt. Sabtal Usman, who might be somewhere in Bas-Bas, a small island near the northwestern tip of Tawi-Tawi. Lt. Usman was the only other soul who knew where Col. Suarez was. Kaluang and Usman were to report to Suarez's hideout as soon as possible.

Navata's other order, if he found Kaluang, was to "hold the fort at Languyan Point" located at the northern midsection of Tawi-Tawi where Col. Suarez planned to move his jungle headquarters. By now, the three-man force was reinforced by Kaluang's men who were left with Navata. Kaluang then proceeded to search for Lt. Usman.

Then, one morning in the predawn darkness after over a week of waiting, Lt. Navata and his men heard the sound of oars striking the



water and coming in their direction. Navata and his men scrambled to defensive positions and anxiously waited. Then someone in the darkness started giving orders to the oarsmen. There was no mistaking that voice. "Is that you Ingal?" Navata called out.

It was Ingal all right. With him was the commander of the Sulu Area Command, Colonel Alejandro Suarez, moving to his new headquarters. Regrouping of the scattered and decimated Sulu Freedom Fighters would soon be under way, and the guerrilla offensive not far away.

## **The Reorganization Of SAC**

### **A Second Submarine**

*Seawolf* was the second submarine to surface in the Sulu Sea bringing arms, ammunition and supplies to the Sulu Freedom Fighters. She was commanded by Lt. Commander Al Bontier, an old hand in submarine warfare. This trip to Tawi-Tawi was *Seawolf's* second guerrilla voyage. Lt. Maut and I played the key role in the successful mission of the submarine.

Two weeks after Maut and I visited Capt. Frank Young at his Dundangan island hideout late in June 1944, we received a secret message from him that a submarine was to surface close to Bas-Bas island. He urgently pleaded that we get eight large kumpit with trusted boatmen to unload arms and supplies for the Sulu guerrillas. Having developed good rapport with the villagers during our several weeks stay in Bas-Bas, it was not hard for us to carry out Young's request. The message added that we would be informed of the definite date and place of the secret rendezvous with the submarine.

Several days later, the messenger returned with the information that the submarine would surface on the evening of 7 July, two miles southwest of Bas-Bas Island. On the morning of the 7th, Maut with four kumpit and I with another four proceeded to an inlet close to the area of rendezvous. The inlet was covered with large mangrove trees.

As we waited in the secret cove with the fully manned kumpit, Capt. Young, Sgt. Romulo Espaldon and two men arrived in an outrigger canoe. (Coincidentally, that afternoon, while waiting for sundown, we saw Lt. Velasquez with a companion passing on their way to look for Capt. Young in Dundangan. We did not know the secret hideout of Col. Suarez, although we had learned that he had moved to Languyan five miles away.

We excitedly told Velasquez about the submarine's arrival. He immediately returned to Col. Suarez's hideout in the Languyan jungle to break the good news.)

At the waning light of sunset, the kumpit started to move out to the open sea. In the first kumpit was Capt. Young and Sgt. Romulo Espaldon. In the second was Lt. Maut and me. The other kumpit followed closely. After half an hour of sending signals we finally saw flashes southwest of our position about a half mile away. There was excitement in the kumpit. This time the moon had taken command of the darkening skies. We were overwhelmed with jubilation and our men rowed with vigor toward the signaling lights.

Suddenly, a huge dark object broke the surface and gradually rose. The submarine was silent, except for the laborious whine of her engine, the free sea still swirling over her decks.

An exchange of signals was again done as the first two kumpit were allowed to approach the half-submerged watercraft. The crew members on deck were fully armed with submachine guns while some were manning the deck gun directed towards us. After proper identification, Young jumped and boarded the submarine. Lt. Maut, Mulo and I were alongside Young in no time.

Then we saw a familiar figure come out of the hatch. It was Capt. Konglam Teo, one of our guerrilla officers who was taken to Australia in the transport submarine *Narwhal* four months earlier. Following Capt. Teo coming through the hatch were five men. One was a weatherman, Sgt. Rodriguez, and four were radio operators.

Meanwhile, the crew started carrying out boxes and crates of radio equipment, arms, ammunition and supplies through the hatch. These were immediately transferred to the kumpit. It was a calm night and the sea was smooth. The moon shone bright, and except for the swift current due to the ebbing tide, the transfer of the supplies to shore went smoothly.

As the tide continued to ebb, the overloaded bottoms of the kumpit started to hit sandbars as they neared the shore. The men had to carry the crates on their shoulders as they waded to shore. It was during the unloading of the supplies to the beach when Col. Suarez, Lt. Velasquez and three men arrived. They were so happy to see Konglam Teo and five of his men from Australia.

Teo saluted Col. Suarez and made an initial report of his Australia trip and the arms, ammunition and medical supplies the submarine was

delivering. We all conferred on the shore. There was hot coffee in containers and sandwiches in baskets from the submarine. It was a rare treat!

The last loads were left on the kumpit and they were ordered to proceed to secret hideouts. When the unloading was completed the submarine hatch was closed and soon the watercraft started to submerge. The long shadowy silhouette faded fast.

This second guerrilla trip of the *Seawolf* proceeded without a hitch. The men and supplies destined for Tawi-Tawi were delivered safely. Little did we know that this voyage of the submarine *Seawolf* was to be its last. In its third guerrilla run it was sunk on 3 October 1944 by a friendly destroyer escort. She was mistaken for an enemy submarine. The *Seawolf* was credited with sending to the bottom of the sea over 71,000 tons of enemy shipping in about a dozen combat patrols.

### **Attachment to Intelligence Radio Unit**

With the arrival of Capt. Konglam Teo, his weatherman and four radio operators, the intelligence radio unit under Capt. Young needed to be beefed up with personnel. Col. Suarez temporarily assigned Lt. Maut, Sgt. Romulo Espaldon and me with this unit to help establish coast watch stations in strategic locations in northern Tawi-Tawi. The Sulu Area Command was still recovering from the most devastating enemy campaign designed to wipe us out. The submarine's arrival with its cargo of arms and ammunition and intelligence paraphernalia was truly a shot in the arm for the Freedom Fighters.

Sgt. Romulo Espaldon, the weatherman and two radio operators were assigned to Capt. Young's secret radio headquarters. Lt. Maut headed a new radio unit assigned to Bas-Bas. With him was one of the radio operators, two guerrilla soldiers and two civilians. I stayed with Lt. Konglam Teo with one radio operator and three civilians.

All three stations took positions on mountain tops with good panoramic views of the ocean around Tawi-Tawi. All intelligence information on Japanese ship and plane movements was relayed immediately to GHQ Australia through Capt. Young's central station.

In the later part of July, Col. Suarez recalled Lt. Maut to the new guerrilla headquarters in Languyan and appointed him as inspector general of the Sulu Area Command. He was ordered to go to the Siasi area and assess the military situation in preparation for a guerrilla offensive. Sgt. Romulo Espaldon was ordered back to headquarters and assigned

as right-hand man of the intelligence chief, Capt. Ismael Ratag, who was reorganizing the unit.

I remained with the radio unit but took over the position of Lt. Maut as head of the Bas-Bas radio station. With me was Radio Operator Corporal Garroza. Garroza was an Ilocano who had lived in the United States for over 20 years. He was very fluent in English and the men respected him for his expertise and his unassuming personality. They addressed him "sir." Garroza confided to me one evening, "At first I felt ill at ease when the men addressed me 'sir.' In my entire stay in America, no one had ever addressed me this way," Garroza lamented.

Our coast watch stations were sending vital information about enemy air and shipping movements to GHQ Australia. Our reports were responsible for heavy enemy shipping and air losses. Then one early afternoon from my lookout station on top of Bas-Bas hill, I saw two enemy naval craft, one of them a transport ship moving slowly along the reef about two miles away. I presumed then that they were evading submarines operating in the sea lanes west of Tawi-Tawi island. I immediately jotted down the message about the ships and ran down the hill for Garroza to relay to Capt. Young.

On my way back to the lookout station, one of the boys I left behind came running down to inform me that one of the ships had stopped at the mouth of the channel a mile away and was unloading troops in two motorboats. I hurriedly went up to confirm the report only to see the fully loaded motorboats already heading in our direction.

I immediately rushed back down with the two men in the lookout station to help Garroza dismantle and pack the radio paraphernalia. We had all equipment on our backs in no time. We were almost breathless. No sooner had we vacated our station than enemy troops landed and rushed in our direction. Failing to find us, they fanned across the clearing.

We made good our escape, keeping to the fringes of the jungle, as we watched them from our elevated position. That evening we took a dugout canoe and left Bas-Bas. We proceeded to Capt. Young's secret base. At Capt. Young's station a message from Col. Suarez awaited me. The message signed by Suarez read, "Proceed to the Languyan Headquarters and report to Capt. Maximiliano Velasquez, regimental adjutant."

This turned out to be the end of my stint with the intelligence radio unit. I enjoyed my brief assignment. I had learned to like Garroza

and remembered his stories about Chicago. Many years later when I took my medical internship in that Windy City, I looked him up. There were several Garrozas in the phone book, but I could not find his name.

### Assignment to Headquarters

My involvement with the Allied intelligence bureau radio unit in July and August of 1944, in isolated mountain tops reporting on enemy shipping and air movements, was an exciting experience. With my new assignment to work with Capt. (formerly lieutenant) Maximiniano Velasquez at the guerrilla headquarters in Languyan, new responsibilities awaited me.

The Sulu Area Command was just recovering from a crushing three-month enemy attack and siege. Reorganization and regrouping of troop remnants scattered all over Tawi-Tawi were now in progress. The arrival of the submarine *Seawolf* with arms, ammunition and other supplies boosted the Freedom Fighters' morale.

Men who arrived in Languyan earlier were assigned to their respective battalions, bivouacked in areas to the left or right of the Sulu Area Command jungle headquarters, housed in a newly completed large jungle hut alongside a stream. It was about 200 yards from Col. Suarez's hut deeper in the jungle. Lt. Velasquez had just arrived from his Bato-Bato hideout 15 miles away, and he alone was manning the office.

To my pleasant surprise, when I reported to him I learned that I had just been promoted to sergeant and was to work directly under him. Likewise, Velasquez also received his promotion to captain. This was the start of a very close working relationship of two workaholics. The reorganization of a decimated guerrilla force required continuous hard work. Capt. Velasquez, however, maintained an air of quiet dignity. He cloaked himself with cold reserve that was almost impossible for me to penetrate. This was understandable for he was twice my age. (He was about 35, while I was 17.)

Languyan was an ideal location for a guerrilla headquarters. The terrain was rough, yet easy to defend. Approaches from the sea were hazardous for potential attackers. Vessels had to pass a circuitous route before reaching the bank of the cove. The thick, wooded, hilly area to the right and left of the headquarters was dotted with foxholes now manned by guerrillas. Fronting this U-shaped defense position was a secondary growth forest.

We were soon to find out that of the more than 1,000 Freedom Fighters who braved, blunted and persevered during the massive three-month enemy campaign, less than 200 were able to answer the call to regroup. Those who returned and escaped to their island homes but kept their firearms received leniency. But those who could not account for the loss of their firearms were treated with distrust. They had to prove not only their loyalty, but also their worth in combat. Most of them volunteered to be in the suicide squads.

My new assignment was challenging. Besides going over all correspondence reaching headquarters, I also had the responsibility to meet and screen community leaders, especially those from Jolo island, guerilla commanders and intelligence agents, including civilians. As the volume of work increased, additional personnel were added to the office.

An interesting job was also assigned to me by Capt. Frederico Laxamana, our regimental health officer. He showed me how to do daily dressings on the back wound of Capt. Fabian Sindayen who was placed on temporary duty with headquarters to recuperate. He had jagged metal fragments of a cal. .50 machine gun bullet lodged in his spine. The doctor also showed me how to clean the wound cavity. It was an eerie sensation having the forceps hit against metal fragments in his spine. I did this daily, using hydrogen peroxide and gauze for cleansing, and applying sulfa powder afterwards. These medicines were among the supplies brought by the submarine *Seawolf*. I was Capt. Sindayen's "doctor" until his back wound healed.

### **Return of Submarine "Narwhal"**

The Sulu Area Command was still in the process of reorganizing when GHQ Australia sent a radio message stating that 30 tons of arms, ammunition, supplies and some clothing were arriving for the Sulu Freedom Fighters on the submarine *Narwhal*. On 16 October 1944, the submarine surfaced close to the northwestern coast of Tawi-Tawi four miles from our Languyan headquarters. Among the best morale-building articles sent with the arms and ammunition were thousands of sewing kits, small cigarette packages, and other items with the message, "I shall return," signed by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Everybody knew that the liberation of the Philippines was close at hand.

With the arrival of new weapons, the skeletal units of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd battalions had become full complements. It was a daily occurrence to see Languyan Bay crowded with kumpit loaded with young men willing and eager to fight. Induction into the guerrilla organization was facilitated. From these new recruits sprung heroes who hated the enemy. Many of these volunteers felt "guilty" for having missed sharing the sacrifices of the Tapihan Guerrillas. Other Muslim leaders who defied the Japanese and yet failed to join the guerrilla movement now harbored a great remorse for having missed the boat. They were now rallying openly to the cause. With scores of their men, they were converging towards Languyan to volunteer.

Accepting their sincere desire to play a role in the liberation of their country from a cruel enemy, Col. Suarez attached these groups to existing combat units to prove their loyalty and worth in combat before they were taken as separate units into the regular guerrilla force.

Some of those who found their way to Languyan were former USAFFE officers and men. Many of them worked with the Japanese puppet government in key positions but also acted as our intelligence agents. This was the reason we were privy to enemy secret plans.

One such officer was Lt. Taib Surian, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). After the surrender of Gen. Fort and his Mindanao USAFFE forces early in 1942, he was among those placed in the concentration camp. Upon his release, Surian accepted a job as a constabulary officer in the puppet government in Jolo. However, he maintained contact with the guerrilla forces through Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang and served as our intelligence agent.

With the landing of American forces in Leyte, Surian and his men escaped with their firearms from the constabulary garrison in Jolo and found their way to the jungles of Languyan. His wife, Antonia, who was my schoolmate, also escaped with him. Her dazzling beauty was overwhelming and was a most welcome sight in the jungle. It had been a long time since I saw one with such alluring beauty. Watching and talking with her about Jolo would make my day.

One day while I was busy interviewing some men from Jolo who wanted to see Col. Suarez, I was thrilled to find that among them were my closest friends and high school classmates, Romulo Soriano and Soriano Eddum. We embraced each other like long-lost brothers.



Boy Soriano, as we called him, was the grandson of Sultan Jiral Abirin. Many years after the war, he was made colonel in the Philippine Air Force (PAF), but was later on killed in battle against Muslim rebels in Tawi-Tawi. Eddum also rose to become a colonel in the Philippine Constabulary, and was elected congressman of Sulu in the 1970s.

One of our intelligence agents, Datu Mustapha Bin Harun, operated in Sabah and stood out among those who had asked for an audience with Col. Suarez deep in our jungle headquarters, because he was among the few datu who became active in our guerrilla movement. He continued to send Col. Suarez intelligence information about the Japanese in British North Borneo and succeeded in organizing a guerrilla band that harassed the enemy with arms furnished by the Tawi-Tawi headquarters.

With the formation of new combat units for the impending guerrilla offensive, there was need for young officers to lead these units. The main source of these commissioned officers were the Tapikan Guerrillas who were tried and tested in combat and who persevered during the underground's darkest hours. I was pleasantly surprised when one morning I had the privilege of reading an order for promotion of young non-commissioned officers. The officers were: Sgt. Romulo M. Espaldon to 3rd Lieutenant, Sgt. Ernesto M. Espaldon to 3rd Lieutenant, and Sgt. Washington Strattan to 3rd Lieutenant.

I was proud and elated, but sobered by the great responsibility of leading young men in combat. My elation was short-lived because among the piles of papers returned from Col. Suarez's jungle office the following day was our promotion sheet with a handwritten comment, "No, too young!" Washington and I were barely 17 while Mulo, my brother, was 18. One month later, another recommendation for our promotion was sent, but Suarez repeated the same comments.





## Chapter VII **Preparing for the Guerrilla Offensive**

### **Gen. MacArthur's Return**

**T**he radio unit kept us updated on the progress of the war, especially in the Pacific. We always looked forward to the evenings because they were our only chance to listen to the radio broadcasts. Those of us who had that rare opportunity were quite proud because one of our favorite newscasts was in Tausug, the native tongue of Jolo. We felt that GHQ was giving the Freedom Fighters of the Sulu Area Command some kind of recognition. We were amused at the newscaster who had coined some "new" Tausug words such as the "Sumayang Galura" after the legendary flying horse or Pegasus when referring to the Flying Fortress (The Flying Fortress refers to the largest American bombers at the time, the B-27s. He described carpet bombing as "Dio duk duk." After the war, we found out that the announcer was one of the Marquez boys, formerly of Siasi.

In the early afternoon of 22 October 1944, Lt. Antonio Regino, our communications officer, excitedly—nay deliriously—dashed to Col. Suarez's headquarters, shouting that the American forces had landed in Leyte. Col. Suarez immediately sent a runner to our unit close by to spread the good news. Our jubilation was boundless. Almost instinctively Pfc. Roger Sarmiento, our clerk, started firing his thompson submachine gun into the air. The rest of the men followed suit. Our merriment almost turned into a mistaken encounter as Capts. Kaluang and Frayna, who heard the firing, immediately sent reinforcements thinking that the headquarters was under attack from the rear. Shortly, their units were firing their guns, too. The exultation was reminiscent of our prewar New Year celebrations.

That evening, a bigger crowd gathered around the communications hut. Everybody was trying to press an ear as closely as possible to the radio. A deafening silence prevailed as The Voice of Freedom was

about to begin. Then a commanding voice, charged with emotion, began to address the entire nation:

People of the Philippines, I have returned. By the grace of Almighty God, our forces stand again on Philippine soil . . . Rally to me! Let the indomitable spirit of Bataan and Corregidor lead on! As the line of battle rolls forward to being with you within the zone of operations, rise and strike favorably at every opportunity.

The voice paused. The Freedom Fighters once again became boisterous. Then the voice continued:

For your home and hearth, strike! For future generations of your sons and daughters, strike! In the name of your sacred dead, strike!

Again, there was stillness in the camp as the speaker went on:

Let no hearts be faint . . . Let every arm be steeled . . . The guidance of Divine God points the way . . . Follow in the name of the Holy Grail to righteous victory!

It was, no doubt, Gen. MacArthur. Just as he had said, we declared right then and there our uprising against the brutal enemy. We raised up our guns and shouted at the top of our voices our firm resolve to drive away the enemy from our shores. The day of deliverance had indeed come. No less than the commander in chief of the southwest Pacific theater had given us the marching orders. We could already feel the glory of freedom.

Transcripts of the dramatic speech were copied and distributed to all the men in the resistance. From then on, as if by a magic spell cast by Gen. MacArthur's arrival speech, we became invincible in battle. We carried the fight to the enemy. Hardly a day passed without the Sulu guerrillas attacking Japanese positions.

We pressed our offensive without letup. The numerous islands of Sulu were littered with Japanese garrisons, so we had our hands full of targets. Gen. MacArthur's electrifying speech, exhorting us to rise up in arms, kept pushing us forward.

Guerrilla warriors who had been secretly moved by kumpit to areas closer to Japanese garrisons and concentration camps in Jolo, Siasi, and southern Tawi-Tawi most often initiated the offensives on those islands. The all-out offensive necessitated the transfer of the command's headquarters to a more accessible, yet defensible, place for more efficient monitoring and supervision of the operations.

In early December, the 1st Combat Company under Capt. Kaluang, and equipped with automatic weapons, was directed to proceed to Jolo island. Other fully armed units were shortly deployed not only to Jolo but also to Siasi and southern Tawi-Tawi. Capt. Frayna led the Tawi-Tawi operations, while the expeditionary force to Siasi was headed by Capt. Abdulrahim Iamo. Most of the troops still bivouacked in the Languyan area were also sent to the battlefields. Meanwhile, the general headquarters was moved to Cula-Cula.

I had to stay behind in Languyan until after all the records, supplies and some of the weapons, ammunition and other supplies recently delivered by a fourth submarine, the *Stingray*, had been properly transferred to our new headquarters.

It was on a bright moonlit Christmas eve that I boarded the last boat that left Languyan for Cula-Cula. We were quite delayed, and when we reached Cula-Cula six kumpit were already moored along the bank of the cove. Before we could dock, fully armed sentries guarding the inlet's entrance checked us. The place was well-protected although obviously vulnerable to air attacks. Then again, the Japanese planes were preoccupied elsewhere.

Col. Suarez's quarters, situated on an elevated wooded area, was about a thousand yards from the nearest shoreline. To the right and below his quarters were two large, newly built quarters. One was to be my and Capt. Velasquez's office and quarters; the other was reserved for the rest of the headquarters' personnel under Lt. Marcelo Aglipay. A few, however, including my brother and Cpl. Ben Rodriguez, were provided only with hammocks. Mulo was eventually reassigned to the intelligence unit of Capt. Ratag.

Among my responsibilities at our new headquarters was to monitor the activities of our men in the field. Since we were at our biggest offensive, reports, written and oral alike, were coming with increasing regularity. And because a good number of the combat leaders were un-

schooled by Western standards (although well-respected in their communities) there were few written reports. Most of the reports were verbal and involved trophies of the war such as captured firearms and ammunition, sabers and supplies. The local leaders, as usual, were again trying to outdo one another in the battlefield.

As the offensive gained momentum, our jungle hospital became busier than ever. Dr. Laxamana, his two male nurses and about a dozen orderlies were hard put attending to the patients. Fortunately, basic medicines and other medical supplies for the treatment of wounds and common ailments were now available, and the regimental health officer had to spend extra time going over the literature about the new drugs.

For their part, the Regimental S-3 personnel under Capt. Trespeces, himself a PMA graduate, also had their hands full training new recruits preparatory to their deployment to the front. It was heartening to see young men full of patriotic zeal shed their youthfulness and do a man's job of fighting for the country.

The kumpit were equally busy shuttling back and forth to bring supplies to the troops in the battlefields. Some of the boats were installed with cal .30 machine guns. The big offensive was really in full swing and every man was assiduously doing his share to attain ultimate victory and regain our freedom.

### **Raid on Enemy Garrison in North Borneo**

Our coast watch radio station, located on a mountain top in Sibutu, had a good panoramic view of the naval activities not only in the Sibutu Channel but even beyond, including Borneo and the Celebes Sea.

Capt. Young, head of the Allied intelligence unit, expressed concern over an enemy garrison in Dangan, North Borneo which he said was too close for comfort. Col. Suarez ordered the garrison destroyed. The mission was given to Lt. Saldin Alibasa, executive officer of "F" Company stationed in Sibutu. Alibasa picked a dozen men for the job, including Pvt. Abdulwahid Bidin who later submitted a vivid eyewitness account of the raid.

Alibasa's squad was beefed up by former guerrillas who surrendered to the enemy during the massive siege on Tawi-Tawi. They primarily joined the suicide squad to regain their honor and hopefully be reinducted into the regular force. Among them were Kahar Ansao, Ambutong

Hajirol, Nooh Indin, Din Siong Pua and Aling Salman. These "desperadoes" displayed such exceptional courage and daring in the mission that their reenlistment was strongly recommended later. The garrison was demolished, all Japanese defenders killed, and Alibasa succeeded in capturing 11 *mata-mata*, the local pro-Japanese policemen.

Early on during the war, the Sulu waters were mined heavily by the Japanese. So it was imperative that the mines be removed as Allied shipping activities were to be intensified in the area following the Americans' Leyte landing.

U.S. Navy officials aboard a seaplane secretly paid us a visit to confer with Col. Suarez about those hazards. Suarez promptly organized three companies of Sulu volunteers later known as the "Bolo Battalion Minesweeping Units of the Sulu Area Command." The auxiliary units were made up of fishermen, pearl divers and seafaring Samals. For logistics and supervision they were attached to the "C" Co., 1st Battalion under Lt. Mahonton Itum, "F" Co., 2nd Battalion under Lt. Hadji Hussin Hassim, and "G" Co., 2nd Battalion under Lt. Hadji Mohammad Ali.

The criteria set for joining the auxiliary units were quite simple: willingness to give voluntary service to the country, able-bodied, good divers, and knowledge of dismantling mines. The last was to be taught to them by our bomb disposal experts.

As an incentive, the volunteers could have all the powder they would take from the mines plus a cash bonus of 10 pesos for every mine retrieved. Those who showed exemplary work were allowed to join the regular guerrilla force. The finders-keepers incentive, however, proved to be unwise as the powder was later used for dynamite fishing which was manifestly destructive to marine life, not to mention the danger of using it. This incentive was subsequently revoked.

The minesweeping units were given specific areas of responsibility. Lt. Itum's team was assigned to areas around Bas-Bas, Tumbagaan, Sugbai, Kang Tipayan, Diki, Kang Tipayan Dakula and the Panguntaran Island group. Lt. Hassim's boys were to work around the vicinities of Pandanan, Tong Calaloan, Loras, South Ubian, Tabawan, Tagas, Mogpios, Buban, Maning Kalat, Siasi and Sitangkai. Ali's unit had Tandubas, Sicubung, Latuan, Mantabuan, Banaran, Bilatan, Simunul, Manukmangka and Tawi-Tawi Bay. Lt. Hadji Abubakar Jacaria was designated overall commander of the minesweeping operations, although he was more of a figurehead since the unit commanders were practically autonomous.

The operations were so effective that when the Americans landed in Tawi-Tawi and Jolo on 2 April and 9 April, the waters were absolutely mine-free. Col. Suarez cited the units for a job well done and integrated several of the volunteers into the regular force. Commander L.R. Neville of the U.S. Navy likewise cited them while the American Forces in the Western Pacific (AFWESPAC) gave official recognition to the minesweeping units.

### **The Banaran Assignment**

The main food supply depot of the Tawi-Tawi guerrilla forces was located on Banaran island, only 10 miles east of Bongao, a Japanese stronghold. Banaran consisted of two villages: Lookan, at its northwestern tip facing Bongao, and Tongusong, at the opposite side of the island. Banaran was also the rest and recreation area for the Tawi-Tawi combatants. It was garrisoned by a force of 60 men under Lts. Kiamting Alasa and Sencio Mohammad Ali. The garrison was located in Lookan. The food collection center, situated in Tongusong, was supervised by Miralam Tillah, a prewar school supervisor.

Col. Suarez was concerned about Banaran because of its vulnerability to attacks by the enemy who still controlled the seas with their barges. If the Japanese also controlled Banaran, the guerrillas would be cut off from their food supply and the offensive would be jeopardized.

So, one morning he ordered me to look into the situation and make recommendations. I was excited by the mission. I had asked many times to be sent to the front lines, but apparently they needed me more at headquarters.

Combat reports reaching the office were getting exciting, and I itched to be part of the action. Also, I was anxious to know the whereabouts of my parents. I learned about the thousands of evacuees in Mantabuan island close to Banaran and wondered whether my family was with them.

Taking a kumpit loaded with troops bound for the combat zones in southern Tawi-Tawi, we negotiated a circuitous route, and by sunrise found ourselves in the high sea. The wind was perfect and we sliced our way through the choppy waters toward Mantabuan some 15 miles away, all the while watching out for enemy barges.

By midday, we reached Mantabuan. The village was teeming with evacuees from Tubig Indangan in Simunul and Manukmangka islands. We gathered that the villagers were strong supporters of the resistance movement. The evacuees were fleeing from the Japanese troops and puppet policemen who reportedly killed a number of the guerrilla sympathizers. Some of the women were raped or forced to marry local pro-Japanese policemen. From some of the refugees I learned that my parents were in the next village called Dalo-Dalo, a couple of miles away.

Several civilians joined me in the hike to Dalo-Dalo. Halfway there I came across a big tree laden with fruit and swarming with white doves called *putian*. The tree was practically covered with the birds. I was a crack shot and tried to take some of them down as a present for my parents who, like most of the evacuees, were apparently starving as food was scarce. I was using a thompson submachine gun and I thought it would be impossible to miss any of the birds. Initially I fired single shots, then went into automatic firing, but to my amazement nothing came down. Putian, incidentally, are believed by the local folk to be good omens. Since I could not hit any bird I decided to forget the idea, feeling frustrated.

Excitement built up in me as we entered the village. Close to the center of the community my guide pointed to one of the small houses on stilts where he said my parents were staying. As I climbed the stairs, my brothers and sisters rushed to meet me. They were crying, and some of them were too weak to move. All were emaciated, malnourished and in tattered clothes. My youngest sister, Zenaida, who was just over two years old, did not know me and stayed in a corner of the house, naked and with skin sores all over her body. My father, I was told, was away, scrounging around for the next meal.

Soon I saw him coming, followed by several villagers.

As he walked through the door, I wanted to hug him, but something held me back. As he looked me over, I sensed his pride and happiness, and I knew that he was thankful for my safety. He, too, had lost so much weight and looked very much older. The privations and sacrifices he and my mother had to go through to support my seven siblings had taken their toll on him. Add to that their anxiety over the fate of two guerrilla sons. I was almost in tears, but I held back. They certainly were a pitiful sight.

I gathered that the day before was another meal-less day. They were new to the island and knew no one except a few fellow evacuees. For

breakfast that morning a kind soul gave them two pieces of boiled tapioca. They asked me to partake of the food, but I couldn't go through the motion of even touching it. I felt a lump in my throat, so I reached into an earthen jar with a dipper made from coconut shell. I almost threw up from the first gulp. Their drinking water wasn't even fit for humans. It was brackish!

I wished I didn't have to leave them again, yet by noontime I asked permission to go. I had to be at Banaran to fulfill my mission.

### **The Banaran Encounter**

I left for Banaran in a small canoe early that afternoon. Bassan, a native of Banaran and a former pupil of my father, volunteered to be my boatman. After three hours we reached Tongusong village on the eastern side of the island. I tied our boat to a jetty that jutted out to the sea from a Chinese store. The owner saw us and offered coffee, which I politely declined, as I saw Mr. Miralam Tillah, head of the local food administration of the movement. He was unloading grated dried cassava packed in banana leaves. I wanted to discuss with him the food situation and our concerns about possible Japanese attacks on the island.

We had barely started our meeting when a commotion broke out. The people were shouting, "Jipon, Jipon!" as they pointed to the western horizon. It was an enemy seacraft coming in fast. Farther to the west huge columns of smoke billowed from Lookan village.

We found out later that two barges full of Japanese marines had landed at Lookan and routed the defending guerrilla force of about 60 men after a brief pitched gun battle. The third barge, also loaded with troops, proceeded to Tongusong to restrain the retreating main guerrilla force, then sacked the village, a vital source of food for the Freedom Fighters. The enemy had just razed Lookan to the ground and was aware that Tongusong was undefended.

As the vessel neared the villagers scampered for safety, taking whatever worldly possessions they could carry. I walked briskly on a long wooden bridge towards dry land, deciding what to do. I could have simply walked out of trouble, but something deep within me prevailed.

The villagers must have thought I was one of the famous Tapikan Guerrillas because of my hair that reached down to my shoulders and



the submachine gun that I was carrying. As a full-fledged warrior, I had always dreamed of doing something heroic, and it was a golden opportunity that I shouldn't miss even if it meant losing life. It was now or never.

"What better time to let my dreams come true," I murmured to myself. Glimpses of my past as well as the atrocities of the enemy raced across my mind and tempered my decision to make a final stand at the island. So I calmed down as I walked towards the village road. Was I glad to see two guerrillas I personally

knew: Pfc. Singah Alam and Pvt. Fernandez Aral. But only Aral was armed; he had a thompson submachine gun strung on his shoulder.

Upon apprising them of the situation, I asked them to join me in defending the island against the approaching enemy whose barge was about to touch land. Aral and Alam agreed with my plan outright, partly because we were boyhood friends. What courage—especially for Alam who didn't even have a gun.

We calmed down the villagers and advised them to evacuate in an orderly way. They felt relieved to know that we were going to defend their small village. One guy armed with a spear and a kris volunteered as he loudly proclaimed his defiance of the Japanese.

"That's my man," I could have told him, yet common sense took the better of him when firing started.

As the Japanese were about to land, the village was already deserted. We took positions at the western end of the village where the sea was deeper and the beach wider—an ideal landing place. It was also close to the house of Tuan Masdal, the village leader who was a leading guerrilla supporter. There we would make our last stand, we decided. The coconut trees lining the seashore and Muslim tombs nearby would provide us with good cover. As I correctly suspected, the barge slowed down and headed for the shore.

I steadied myself behind a tall coconut tree. About 20 feet to my right and slightly behind me was Aral, also taking cover behind a coconut tree. Alam was two trees behind us. Although unarmed, Alam made himself useful as our ammunition man; he had two boxes of my ammo for reloading. He was also prepared to take over should Aral or I get hit first.

As we waited for the Japanese to come within firing range, adrenalin must have been pumping into my bloodstream. In that short remaining moment of peace I imagined the glorious past of a national hero who captivated my boyhood fantasies: Rajah Lapu-Lapu of Mactan island, the

chieftain who gallantly stood up against Ferdinand Magellan, the leader of the first band of Spanish colonizers who landed on this island.

As a young boy, I was told that Lapu-Lapu's strategy was to attack the invaders when they were most vulnerable, i.e., while they were still wading through the water to the beach. Another scenario that flitted through my mind was that of a Muslim amok or juramentado who is about to die for what he believes is a righteous cause. A juramentado would tighten his binder around his waist in the belief that even if one-half of his body had been mortally damaged, the other half would still have the strength and stamina to sustain his attack.

I was unmindful of imminent danger or death as we watched the barge approach the seashore directly towards us. I told Aral to get ready as I held my gun against the tree and took careful aim. In my sight was the Japanese officer of the troops with a sword at his side as he swept the beach with his binoculars. It felt like ages as I held my fire. The Japanese crowded the deck as they prepared to jump into the shallow water.

"They must not even reach the beach," I told myself as I steadied my aim. I also reminded myself that I shouldn't panic because a great deal of survival depends on being cool yet aggressive in combat.

With my gunsight locked in and my safety catch released, I gently pressed the trigger. Almost simultaneously Aral also opened fire. We peppered the barge's deck with bullets, emptying one magazine after another. The Japanese officers with sabers were the first to fall. The enemy was completely taken by surprise. With the first salvo I already felt we had effectively aborted their plan to attack the village. The initial batch of casualties littered the vessel's deck. Meanwhile, Alam was feverishly reloading our magazines.

The barge continued to surge forward and ran aground. Still, there was no firing from their end. We had already spent three long clips of ammo each before they could retaliate with their machine guns. Their aim, however, was way off. They were shooting blindly.

Suddenly there was smoke coming out of the seacraft, giving me the impression that it was on fire. But it turned out that they restarted the engine in full power and in reverse to extricate the barge from the sand band. All the while its machine gun continued its insane chatter, only to stop as the vessel slowly backed out. Heads started to pop out again on the deck, and we swept them repeatedly with hot lead.

After some 20 minutes we surmised that the enemy had evidently pinpointed our defense positions as mortar shells exploded around us. The rattle of their machine gun also sent bullets whizzing past my head. Their aim was getting better. I pressed myself closer to the ground without letting them get out of my gunsight. The enemy watercraft made another attempt to hit land. The thought that they might eventually succeed in reaching the beach was terrifying.

"They must not land," I kept telling myself. Aral and I stood up and fired more intensely. Not even one Japanese was able to jump into the water. Even if they did, it would have been a lot easier to kill them one by one in the water.

Again, the barge withdrew, stern first, under cover of heavy machine gun fire. But the mortar shells were coming closer and closer to us, tearing branches overhead. Our defense ground shook with the shelling. Then I heard Alam shout, "Indick is hit. Indick is hit." I briefly turned to my right and saw Aral lying unconscious on the ground, covered with dirt. "Help him," I ordered Alam, as I kept firing on the retreating vessel to give my comrades cover.

Aral showed no sign of bleeding. He was merely stunned, but he sustained a concussion due to the mortar shell that exploded near him. Miraculously he was unhurt. Alam deposited him in a safe place farther to the rear, then picked up his gun and took over.

Apparently irked by their heavy casualties and the loss of their commander, the barge once more surged forward with heavy machine gun fire and mortar shelling in a final effort to dislodge us, but we tenaciously held our ground and continued to sweep the heads popping up on its deck with our submachine guns. Mother Nature was on our side. The tide was ebbing while the sun was setting. Experience in the resistance had shown us that the enemy usually called off their assault at sundown.

A great feeling of relief gripped me as I watched the vessel back out farther and farther and out of range. "It's all over," I said to myself. I still suspected, though, that they would return.

Our successful stand fortified my belief that, with additional men, we could thwart the enemy's attempt to attack the village and deprive the guerrilla movement of a vital source of food.

That night I led Aral and Alam towards Lookan through the forest. Along the way we met evacuees from Lookan who advised us against

going to the village because the Japanese had overtaken it. After routing the defenders, they had set the houses on fire. Having just succeeded in defending Tongusong, I refused to heed their warning and proceeded to Lookan even though our guide had left us.

As we approached Lookan we were unaware that the school building, the only structure spared by the enemy, was occupied by the Japanese troops. We found ourselves between two enemy forces; one was based at the school building which was farther inland, and the second was right inside the village area close to shore. Luckily for us they must have mistaken us for civilian evacuees.

We hastily withdrew, but prepared for any outcome. I unhooked my grenade and readied my submachine gun as we backed out into the woods where we took a restful, albeit brief, sleep.

As dawn broke, I had the nagging feeling that the Japanese would resume their attack on Tongusong, although this time not from the sea but by land. I surveyed the area for a good defense position and found a huge log close to the trail. We waited the whole day for an ambush, but no Japanese came. We found out later in the day that they had left the island. We also learned that the guerrillas manning the garrison in Lookan had left for Mantabuan that day. In the evening we decided to return to Dalo-Dalo aboard a small canoe that barely accommodated the three of us.

As we approached Dalo-Dalo by sunrise I was amazed at the sight of a huge crowd milling on the shore. It turned out that news of our successful defense of Tongusong had preceded us to Dalo-Dalo through the civilian evacuees. Among our welcomers were my father and the village head. It never dawned on me that what we did in Tongusong would be considered extraordinary by the civilians. But the pride that I read in my father's face was all that mattered to me.

While Aral and Alam, who were actually on rest and recreation leave, joined their respective units, I went home with my father, regretting that I failed to bring them food as I had promised. But the villagers more than made up for my shortcoming. They were happy to share with us the food they had. I stayed with my family for a few more days to arrange their evacuation to a safer place near Cula-Cula where food was still available. Somebody was more than willing to let us use his big sailboat for the family's transfer to Cula-Cula.

The following day saw us in Ungus Matata, an island just six miles off our general headquarters. While at Ungus Matata I received an urgent call from the headquarters ordering me to report back immediately. Afraid that I might be charged with absence without leave (AWOL) I hurried back to the headquarters.

Upon my arrival, Col. Suarez called me into his office. I braced myself for any reprimand for the delay in my return, but I was wrong. Col. Suarez gave me a really warm welcome, with a promotion to boot. He instructed Capt. Velasquez to cut an order promoting me to 3rd Lieutenant and designated me commanding officer of a newly created unit—"H" Co., 2nd Battalion—effective 1 February 1945. He further instructed Velasquez to include in the order the promotion of Sgt. Romulo Espaldon to 3rd Lieutenant with the designation of battalion intelligence officer, 1st Battalion; and Sgt. Washington A. Strattan to 3rd Lieutenant, assigning him as executive officer of "D" Co., 1st Battalion. The promotion made me the youngest company commander of the Sulu Area Command.

Upon my commission to 3rd lieutenant—upgraded to 2nd lieutenant a few months later—I was designated commander of "H" Co., 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment. Except for the noncommission officers, most of my men were Tausug recruits from Siasi, Pandami, Pata, Lugus and a few Samals from Tawi-Tawi.

As I looked over their backgrounds, I found out some of them were former "blackteeth" outlaws while others had operated as pirates in the Tawi-Tawi and Sulu waters.\* It gave me a great feeling to know they had found better use for their bravery. I respected their dark past and was even pleased with their potential as combatants. They, too, respected me for being one of the original Tapikan Guerrillas.

Being younger than my men was my asset and after I had led them through some combat actions, I could say that courage and fierceness was a common denominator among them. Their bravery, though, bordered on fanaticism.

A case in point was when I ordered one of them to scout the enemy position, but immediately rescinded the order when I realized the great

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\* "Blackteeth" literally meant persons whose teeth were black from chewing betel nut but also referred to warriors uneducated—by Western standards yet ferocious in battle. In better times it implied fearsome outlaws who defied government forces.

danger that it entailed. Pvt. Assi, a Tausug who addressed me as "Si" (Sir) pleaded with me, saying when his superior orders him to advance, the order should not be recalled even if it meant certain death. Besides, his *anting-anting* (amulet) called for no retreat.

My first assignment as a company commander, though important, was unglamorous. I was to ensure the safety of our Cula-Cula headquarters and nearby environs from enemy attack—which was a rather remote possibility at the time because we were then carrying the fight to the enemy.



## Chapter VIII **Tawi-Tawi on the Eve of Liberation**

### **Advance Allied Intelligence Unit**

**B**efore long a 12-man advance Allied intelligence unit had arrived in Cula-Cula to work behind enemy lines, and they needed a guerrilla counterpart for logistical support and security. Col. Suarez assigned me as leader of the guerrilla contingent. The Allied intelligence unit was headed by Capt. Olaf Tier, an Australian. His executive officer was Lt. Tremain, an American. I picked 14 of my men for the mission. Our area of operation was in the vicinity of Bongao island which had been heavily fortified by the enemy.

We moved out to the area aboard a kumpit under cover of darkness.

We conducted surveillance operations for several days on Bongao and Pababag islands to determine their defenses. Through heavy-duty binoculars we detected big gun emplacements in the hillsides and concrete pillboxes along the coastlines. It was not long before our presence was also detected by the Japanese, and patrols were dispatched to destroy our base of operations, compelling us to move to a safer place.

We chose the highest point of Mt. Balimbing, about 2,000 feet above sea level and facing Bongao. It had a good view of the island fortress as well as of the Japanese airfield in Sanga-Sanga. Our binoculars enabled us to observe the activities in the two enemy strongholds, which we relayed on a round-the-clock basis to a U.S. naval fleet on standby near the area.

On our third day in our new mountain lookout point, 24 Corsair planes started bombing Bongao and the Sanga-Sanga airfield. Henceforth the two Japanese strongholds were subjected to daily air attacks involving 4 to more than 20 U.S. fighter bombers. Thick black smoke billowed, and as a result of such raids, huge fires were visible to the naked eye from our post.

It was a magnificent sight to see droves of Corsair planes in formation hundreds of feet above Bongao island, making graceful dives and unleashing their lethal cargoes on the fortified targets. Lower level strafing would always follow the bombings in much the same way as the Japanese did to us when we were still on the receiving end. The gull-wing F44 Vought planes were noted for their 4:1 kill ratio, and they were rightly dubbed "whistling death" by the enemy. The siege on Bongao and Sanga-Sanga went unabated for two weeks.

Then one day Capt. Tier asked me to join him in meeting a P.T. (Patrol Tornado) boat in the open sea.\* I had never seen a P.T. boat before, let alone ridden one, and the invitation excited me. Also coming with us was one of Capt. Tier's men whom I knew only as Nick, who was of Russian-American descent. Nick was an intractable fellow. When we were operating behind enemy lines near Bongao, he would swim across the channel to spy on the Japanese, then cut loose the enemy ships moored on the piers.

We chartered a kumpit along with boatmen and sailed out to the open sea where, after some two hours, I saw my first patrol torpedo (P.T.) boat racing swiftly toward us. We boarded it and soon we were skimming over the water towards Zamboanga about 200 miles to the north, where the American liberation forces landed two days earlier—10 March 1945. The P.T. boat ride was thrilling and I envied the sailors no end. Why should they enjoy all the inventions of modern technology which we, the natives, could only long for in our dreams?

We reached Zamboanga by morning and I was aghast at the sight that greeted me. The once beautiful city was devastated. Inland, skirmishes were still going on. The guerrillas were fighting alongside the Americans. We were ushered to a building, obviously wrecked by a bomb, which served as the safehouse of the American intelligence unit. The guard asked me to leave my gun, grenades and ammo belt with him.

I was barely five feet tall, and I must have been a funny specimen of a guerrilla fighter. The thompson submachine gun strapped on my shoulder, and a .45 cal. pistol dangling down to my knee made me appear ridiculously disproportionate to my weapons. I must have been so used to being armed that I felt naked without them. Since I was issued my first

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\* A P.T. boat is a small armed vessel chiefly used for torpedoing enemy ships.



firearm, I always had one on my person every moment of my life as a Freedom Fighter.

On my second day in Zamboanga I was called to the office of Col. Ames, the American intelligence officer. He picked my brains for information about the enemy's strength in Bongao and Sanga-Sanga and the activities of the guerrillas on the two islands. He also asked many questions about Jolo island. I learned later that they needed the information for their forthcoming operations in Sulu.

After my conference with Col. Ames, Capt. Tier briefed me about another mission we were going to undertake. We would go back to Bongao in a four-P.T. boat contingent to draw enemy fire with the goal of pinpointing the enemy's gun emplacements so that the U.S. planes could knock them down. In other words, we would voluntarily turn ourselves into targets for the Japanese. It seemed to me that the exercise we were about to do was unnecessary, as nothing of strategic importance could have withstood the tremendous assaults on Bongao and Sanga-Sanga in recent weeks.

That same afternoon the P.T. boat took us to Isabela in Basilan Island, 10 miles away, where three other P.T. boats were on standby. Later the four craft slipped from their moorings and raced together towards the setting sun. The boats belonged to the so-called Hawk Squadron. Capt. Tier was in the lead boat, I in the third, and Nick in the fourth. As we sliced through the water southwest, I noticed that everybody was keeping himself busy, but I could sense the tension. It was a good thing some of the crew inquired about the enemy in Tawi-Tawi—their strength, areas occupied as well as territories held by friendly forces—or I would have felt silly doing nothing. I regretted that I wasn't able to fully satisfy their queries concerning the enemy in Bongao.

One of the crew I came to know only as Mario, an Italian American, was very amiable. He led me to a small section of the storeroom and opened a package.

"This is from my mother who lives in New York. She sent me this last Christmas but I never had the occasion to open it. Now I want to share it with you," he explained. It was a fruitcake and I had never tasted one before. He offered me a piece. It simply tasted divine.

"Where are you from?" he continued, trying to make me feel at ease.

"I'm from this area and I grew up in Bongao, the island we are heading for," I answered. He asked more questions and offered me another piece of cake. Finally, he excused himself to retire.

The drone of the powerful engine kept me awake. Having lived by the sea practically all my life, the sound of the waves splashing against the hull kindled a nostalgic emotion that drew me out to the deck. I sat among the coils of rope and scattered life jackets, seeking solace. I felt it was time for meditation and prayers, but my thoughts brought me back to Manukmangka, my island.

I remembered my parents pleading with me to reconsider my plan to join the guerrilla movement. I thought of how I agonized, gathering the courage to tell them about that plan. I was very young, but the urge to fight was burning inside me by the day. I even lied about my age during my enlistment. Two years seemed ages. "Now I'm one of the more experienced soldiers of the resistance, and a commander of a unit of young but fierce Muslim warriors," I mused.

### **Defying Death**

The night was chilly so I buttoned up my jacket to protect myself from the misty wind. Then I realized that I was not alone on the deck. A few feet away I noticed the form of a man against the faint glow of the sea. I did not see him come up, so he must have been there before me. I approached him, but he seemed oblivious of my presence.

"Hi, there," I said.

He turned towards me and I saw a lean face clothed in melancholy. He, too, was friendly, but then I thought, "Aren't all lonely people friendly?"

"I'm Fred," he said, offering me his hand.

"I'm Ernie," I said, as we shook hands.

He opened up, but unlike the other crew members, he didn't say anything about the war. Instead he intimated to me about his home as if I were a longtime friend. He even showed me a picture of his family.

On that dark, tropical, sultry night I could hardly figure out anything, but his descriptions of his family were so vivid it seemed I had seen them before. We talked lengthily although he did most of the talking about his wife and two children.

The night was getting deeper and the salty wind stronger, irritating my eyes, so I excused myself and left Fred on the deck.

Breakfast aboard was unusually early. Everybody was up and about when I woke up. Shortly, blasts from the vessels' big guns and bursts of machine guns sent me scampering to the bridge. The skipper assured me they were just testing the guns. As daybreak painted the skies with hues of red and yellow, I noticed we were already approaching Banaran island. The second P.T. boat strayed close to the reef where Lt. Islani Sapal, our guerrilla intelligence officer, hopped aboard from a canoe. The sea was calm and I savored the pristine beauty of Bongao mountain reaching up to the sky under the majestic early morning sunlight. It effectively concealed the dangers that lurked inside the island's caves and hillsides.

I knew the mountain and the thick forests well. As a young boy I used to scale that mountain with friends, just to have a commanding view of the surroundings. From atop we would marvel at the emerald green sea gradually turning blue as the water got deeper. We could see the neighboring islands with their sunbathed white beaches. The hillsides surrounding Bud Bongao, as we usually called it, were luxurious woods inhabited by flora and fauna where my father and I used to hunt.

From afar our island looked so serene, so secure.

The calm Bongao waters also hid the dangers lurking in its belly. The area was littered with Japanese mines. Fortunately we knew exactly where those mines were, and had pinpointed a narrow lane where ships could safely pass, using tall trees and flags as reference points. Our guerrilla intelligence agents pointed them out to us.

I was jolted back to the here and now when someone handed me a steel helmet and something that looked like a baseball catcher's breast pad to put on. He also taught me how to use the Mae West life jacket as he helped me into it.\* I looked around and saw everybody dressed in the same suit and helmet. They were then assembled in groups on the deck and given their last-minute instructions.

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\*A Mae West life jacket is an inflatable, bright yellow vest or lifejacket used by airmen and sailor to keep afloat when their aircraft or ship gets damaged. Mae West was a beautiful actress with a beautiful bosom who was popular during World War II. Perhaps the inflated vest looked like Mae West's bosom, hence the name of the life jacket.

Our boat was third in line. The lead craft were about 150 yards away. I realized that we were heading straight for Bongao, just three miles away. The engine whined more laboriously and the vibrations became stronger as the boat picked up more speed. The column changed course and reduced speed. Bongao was then only about a mile away.

I stayed in the open cockpit beside the skipper. I peeked over the rim to get a better view. I felt more relaxed with my chin resting on the back of my left hand flat on the dashboard. Again, a feeling of excitement flowed over me just thinking that I was riding one of the fastest boats of the U.S. Navy. Watching the crew in full-battle gear and ready for action gave me a sense of equanimity that pervaded my whole system. I also felt differently, wearing a steel vest, a helmet, and a life jacket. Somehow, at that moment, fear seemed to have lost its meaning for me.

The situation I was in at that time was in stark contrast to the battle scenes involving the antiquated kumpit and heavily armed, more maneuverable Japanese vessels, where the results were invariably disastrous for the Freedom Fighters.

As we got closer to the shorelines, the engines calmed down, but the tension heightened. Suddenly, white geysers were leaping up around us, and the boat's big guns stirred into action. One Japanese shell missed us, sending a vertical stream of water high into the air.

I was marveling so at the action that I failed to realize the gravity of our situation. The P.T. boats which moments ago were slowly cruising, deliberately trying to draw enemy fire, spurred into action and zigzagged into the bay at full speed. A curtain of leaping water hid the lead boat from my view. She reappeared, still majestic, and with guns blazing. All the guns in the four craft chorused as they returned the enemy's fire with equal fury. We could see the exact place where the Japanese gun emplacements were located as they belched fire. They were everywhere, and it became evident to me that we were like sitting ducks out here in the sea.

The lead boat emitted smoke and disappeared behind a black screen. We were trying to get out of the enemy's range of fire when I felt a big jolt and the boat shuddered. I saw that our boat was on fire. We'd been hit. A shell had ripped a big hole in her side just above the waterline and below the torpedo immediately beside me. I thought we were going to explode, but the well-trained crew promptly extinguished the fire.

Suddenly, I heard the skipper shouting, "Help him! Help him!"

I turned around, looked up, and saw the machine gunner desperately trying to extricate himself from the gun turret. His eyes stared blankly as blood gushed from one side of his neck. I was the only one doing nothing at the time so I jumped out of the cockpit and was beside the wounded sailor in no time at all. I helped him out of the turret, unmindful that his blood was also soaking me, and gently put him down on the deck. My right hand pressed on the lacerated portion of his neck. He tried to talk but no sound came out. He began to be delirious as blood continued to ooze profusely from his wound, seeping through my fingers. He struggled to free his right hand as one of the crew tried to insert a needle into his vein. Then somebody handed me a bottle to hold high with my left hand. A straw-colored liquid started to flow into his vein. Blood plasma, I found out later. But he was losing blood faster than the plasma was getting into his system.

"Raise the bottle higher," somebody barked at me.

The wounded man tried to free his arm again, but someone held it down as his strength gradually waned. Then his eyes closed, his skin turned ashen, and his shallow breathing stopped. His face lay in a pool of red on the deck. My hand stiffened as I eased the pressure on his neck wound which had ceased bleeding. The futility of our efforts was obvious. We felt so helpless as we watched life slowly leave him.

Then I saw a slight movement. His right hand made a faint motion and with what seemed to be his last remaining strength, he slowly reached for his hip pocket, pulled something out and took a last long look at it. He smiled faintly as he viewed the picture of his family that he showed me the night before. Then, with quivering hand, he pressed it gently against his lips. His eyes closed again, and serenity veiled his face; his hands on his chest still clutched the picture. Death had to wait a while longer for him to bid his loved ones a final goodbye, even from afar.

Meanwhile, without reducing speed, the P.T. boats turned in a wide arc to get out of the enemy's firing range. As the vessel came out of the smoke screen, fear gripped me. I was mortified, realizing that we strayed into the mine area. I reminded the skipper about it, and the boat made a sharp turn. Soon we were in safe waters again.

Smoke was still coming out from the damaged section, and as we lagged behind in the convoy the radio system beside the skipper rattled words I couldn't understand. But it didn't take long for me to figure it out. We were being asked to transfer to the boat behind us as ours had to be towed.

The experience remained one of the most dramatic moments of my life. The details, even the gory ones, are still vivid in my mind, and I am sure I would not miss anything even if I were to retell it a thousand times.

Back in the headquarters weeks later Col. Suarez told me how helpful I was, and how cool and fearless I had remained in the P.T. escapade in Bongao. I should have felt proud, but instead I felt embarrassed. "How could he have known it?" I asked myself.

### **Gearing Up for the Offensive**

The first delivery of arms, ammunitions and supplies to the Sulu Area Command by submarine on 6 March 1944 was only partly successful. The transport submarine *Narwhal* had to make an emergency dive when two approaching Japanese warships were sighted by radar. Of the 20 tons destined for the Sulu guerrillas, only five tons were successfully delivered.

On 7 July 1944, the second submarine, *Seawolf*, surfaced, but its main "deliveries" were Lt. Konglam Teo, one weatherman, four radio operators and their paraphernalia. Some arms, ammunition and supplies came with them. On 16 October 1944, *Narwhal* returned, bringing 30 tons of arms, ammunition and supplies. In addition to the automatic weapons including thompson submachine guns (TSMGs), BARs, carbines, and grenades, there were 81 mm. mortars and shells.

As soon as we received our military deliveries from GHQ Australia we knew that the day of deliverance was coming. When American forces landed in Leyte on 20 October 1944 and Gen. MacArthur made his emotional plea for the resistance movements all over the Philippines to strike hard blows at the enemy, the Sulu Freedom Fighters felt unshackled. Preparations for the offensive were immediately put into motion.

The main problem the guerrillas faced while preparing for the offensive was logistics. All arms, ammunition and supplies had to be shipped by kumpit from our Tawi-Tawi headquarters to areas of operations on Jolo island, Siasi and in southern Tawi-Tawi. The Japanese still had control of the seas and our kumpit had to take evasive action to prevent encounters in the high seas. This they did by traveling at night or avoiding sealanes frequented by gunboats, armed barges and launches. Occasionally encounters would take place with the guerrillas taking a beat-

ing. Sometimes, with enough initiative, aggressiveness, and plain luck, the guerrillas would prevail, and the Japanese armed watercraft would turn tail.

One such sea engagement took place on 3 February 1945 when two kumpit loaded with crates of arms, ammunition, supplies and an 81mm. mortar, for the Jolo guerrillas were attacked by a heavily-armed enemy barge between Lugus and Tapul in the Siasi area. The enemy barge started firing with machine guns from a distance.

Lt. Fortunato Sinoro who was head of the guerrillas in the kumpit was armed only with a carbine while his companion, Cpl. Cecilio Dario, had an Austin submachine gun. As the barge came closer, they fired back but their small arms were no match for the heavy weapons of the enemy. Their kumpit were hit and several guerrillas were wounded. Sinoro asked the men in the other kumpit carrying the mortar to move closer. Dario boarded it and immediately mounted the 81mm. mortar. Having had no experience handling a mortar, he lobbed the first shell, but it fell far off its mark. He made adjustments and lobbed the second shell and, surprisingly, it landed close to the barge. This made the barge slow down even as it continued to fire. Dario's third also missed as a geyser of water spouted beside the barge. Thinking that they were up against seasoned mortar men, the enemy vessel turned tail, never to return.

From that time on, the enemy was never sure if they still had control of the seas in the Sulu archipelago.

### **The Guerrilla Offensive**

Before the American forces landed on Leyte on 20 October 1944, there were an estimated 10,000 enemy troops in Sulu. Guerrilla fighters were gradually and secretly deployed to enemy-occupied territories. Because Sulu was an archipelago, the deployment of logistics had been a problem. Armed Japanese barges and gunboats plied the Sulu seas.

Col. Suarez divided Sulu into three sectors for the planned offensive—Tawi-Tawi, Siasi and Jolo. On Jolo island, where enemy concentration was heaviest, there were an estimated 6,000 Japanese troops. The heaviest concentrations were in Jolo town, Bud Tumantangis and Maimbung areas. There were other garrisons in several other locations. In the Siasi sector, enemy troops numbering about 1,000 men were con-

centrated in Siasi town and in Luuk Maulana on Lapak Island. Japanese troops were reinforced by the puppet Mayor, Datu Idiris Amerhussin, and his police force of over 100 men.

In Tawi-Tawi, Bongao island was transformed into a naval fortress. Big gun emplacements were concealed along the hillsides. Machine gun nests, pill boxes and hidden cannons dotted the coastlines. Troops, big guns and machine guns also protected the Sanga-Sanga airfield. Garrisons had also been established in Bato-Bato, which was the enemy's first line of defense against guerrilla attacks from the northern half of Tawi-Tawi. A garrison was also established in Ubol on the island of Simunul and the school building was fortified and surrounded by pill boxes and trenches. Pro-Japanese police forces reinforced the Japanese garrison. There were over 3,000 enemy troops in Tawi-Tawi.

The guerrilla offensives in the three sectors occurred simultaneously. The liberation of the three sectors could each be divided into two phases—the first being from the time the guerrillas launched their offensive in earnest after the Leyte invasion up to the landing of American forces in Tawi-Tawi on 2 April and on Jolo island on 9 April 1944. The second phase started with the American landings on Tawi-Tawi and Jolo, up to the end of organized enemy resistance and mopping-up operations.

The encounter reports were by no means complete, but combat results were eloquently manifested in what the guerrillas had accomplished. When the American forces landed in Tawi-Tawi and on Jolo island, not a single shot was fired. The guerrilla forces were on the beach to welcome them. Japanese forces were already decimated and pinned down, "ripe" for the American forces to pound with artillery and bombs, and later for guerrillas to mop up.





## Chapter IX **The Liberation of Tawi-Tawi**

**G**en. MacArthur's emotional appeal for the Filipino Freedom Fighters to attack sent elements of the Sulu Area Command on a number of assaults against Japanese garrisons and strongholds in the Sulu archipelago.

On 20 November 1944, Lt. Abdulhamid Lukman attacked an enemy station at Biha-Biha on the northern coast of Tawi-Tawi, annihilating the 25-man force. Cpl. Amman Mushiba distinguished himself with his aggressiveness and expert use of his automatic rifle, while Pvts. Sarail Pungutan and Jumdayan Dammang were wounded in that encounter. A week later, another Japanese garrison manned by 30 troops in the same area was also raided, leaving 27 of the enemy dead. The three who were able to escape were eventually found hacked to death. The two incidents virtually liberated the northwestern part of Tawi-Tawi.

At about the same time, guerrillas on the eastern side of Tawi-Tawi, off the coast of Balimbing, intercepted two boatloads of Japanese soldiers and wiped out one of them. The other boat tried to flee, but the guerrillas caught up with it and sank it. No survivors were reported, while the guerrillas suffered no casualty.

On 28 November another guerrilla patrol besieged a Japanese detachment in Culape, northeast of Bato-Bato, killing 9. In Bato-Bato, Sgt. Roque Flores and his men ambushed an enemy patrol, killing all 18. Flores lost 3 men. Another enemy patrol of 7 men was waylaid by Sgt. Dizon's unit, giving the Japanese no chance to fire back.

The Tawi-Tawi guerrillas were more than pleased with their new acquisitions of automatic weapons which proved highly effective in staging hit-and-run operations against the enemy. The Bato-Bato Tarawakan Road dividing the southern half of Tawi-Tawi, which was regularly patrolled by the enemy, became their favorite hunting ground.

Even the Japanese superiority in number failed to intimidate the Sulu warriors. On the contrary, they liked it better when their objective was larger because it meant bigger "game" and more kills.

The Sulu Freedom Fighters' relentless attacks on Japanese positions and patrols in the Bato-Bato sector were so effective that the enemy started to withdraw to Bongao and Sanga-Sanga in mid-January 1945. The local fighters immediately occupied abandoned enemy garrisons in Bato-Bato and Tarawakan. The Japanese retreat had special significance for the guerrillas because only a year earlier they were ejected from the place by a strong enemy force of about 6,000 seasoned soldiers backed up by naval and air assaults.

### **Attack on Japanese Garrison in Ubol**

After they had cleared the Bato-Bato Tarawakan area, Capt. Guligado and Lt. Abdulhamid Lukman were ordered to attack the Sanga-Sanga airfield where the Japanese troops were well entrenched.

Indeed, the guerrilla offensive to liberate Tawi-Tawi had shifted to high gear. The Freedom Fighters began to train their guns on the enemy fortifications in Bongao and Sanga-Sanga, with Capt. Engracio Guligado and Lt. Lukman having initiated the siege.

To ease the pressure on Guligado's unit in Sanga-Sanga, Col. Suarez ordered the attack on the enemy garrison in Ubol, Simunul, the seat of the island's pro-Japanese puppet government, backed up by about 80 Japanese troops. The puppet police force of about 30 men reinforced the garrison based in a school building secured with sandbags, pillboxes and trenches.

Capt. Frayna and about 100 men moved out of the command's headquarters in Cula-Cula aboard three kumpit bound for Ubol. The party stopped over at Balimbing where 50 men troops under Lt. Ladja Indanan joined them. The group landed at Tubig Indangan in Simunul on 9 January. Guided by Panglima Sarabi, a strong guerrilla supporter, Frayna's attacking force negotiated the 4-kilometer trek through the jungle towards Ubol.

But the enemy had gotten information through their double agents, thus depriving Frayna's unit the element of surprise. From the edge of the forest facing the garrison, Frayna ordered the attack. The wide clearing separating the two forces presented a big problem for the guerrillas

who shelled the garrison with 81mm. mortars. The Japanese retaliated with their own mortar, which proved to be more effective because the guerrillas did not have the kind of cover the enemy enjoyed. The guerrillas rushed towards the enemy garrison but were repulsed, sustaining casualties.

The fighting lasted for several hours before the guerrillas retreated due to heavy casualties. Capt. Frayna himself was hit on the knee by mortar shrapnel. Another guerrilla unit involved in the offensive was also repulsed under intense firing from the garrison, wounding several men including their leader, Cpl. Narra Habibon.

Later in the day, two barges from Bongao arrived to reinforce the beleaguered Japanese garrison. The reinforcements opened another front against the guerrillas from the shoreline. Frayna retreated through the forest to Tubig Indangan. But he refused to be evacuated, and did not want to ease the pressure on the enemy. He asked for reinforcements even as he decided to proceed to Manukmangka Island, five miles south, where many of the villagers were their supporters. In fact, many of his own men were natives of Manukmangka.

### **The Manukmangka Encounter**

Frayna hoped the enemy would pursue him to Manukmangka, and he was dead right. He even got more than he bargained for. Reinforcements from Ubian and Tandubas arrived before the enemy could attack the island one week later. Col. Suarez also dispatched another unit led by Capt. Fabian Sindayen to beef up Frayna's attacking force.

A combined force of about 300 men armed with two 81mm. mortars, submachine guns, several BARs and grenades, plus the morale-boosting support of the villagers and assured food supply, braced the guerrillas for the enemy attack. Meanwhile, about 50 men under Lts. Julhari Sapal and Yusap Kalbit were positioned in Nunuk on the western flank of the island half a mile away from the village in anticipation of Japanese attack. The area was the most probable site for an enemy landing as it had no coral reefs.

The main guerrilla force was deployed in a coconut grove fronting the village. Capt. Sindayen's troops were on the right flank closer to the beach, Capt. Frayna and Lt. Pajawa Itum and their men took the center, while Lt. Lasdin Badal secured the left flank near the woods.

A strong Japanese reinforcement aboard five armed barges stormed the beach in Nunuk early morning of 1 January. The defenders tenaciously held on but were overwhelmed by mortar and machine gun fire, prompting them to withdraw—but not until they inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. They managed to join Badal's force at the left flank.

Having routed the guerrilla force at the beach, the enemy proceeded to attack the main guerrilla force deployed at the coconut grove. The Japanese advanced under cover of heavy mortar and machine gun fire, but the Freedom Fighters held their fire.

When the advancing Japanese came within effective firing range, the guerrillas swept them off with a lethal salvo of weapons including mortars, BARs, thompson submachine guns and carbines. The Japanese recoiled and regrouped, then retaliated with their own shelling and machine gun firing. For a couple of hours it became a seesaw battle where the Japanese appeared to have the upper hand mainly because of their knee mortars which were more maneuverable and effective in such encounters.\*

Capt. Sindayen set aside his thompson, took the BAR being used by Sgt. Imam Marjukin, and zigzagged his way toward the enemy's machine gunner, effectively covering the enemy's advance. A duel between the BAR and the machine gun ensued, with the BAR prevailing as the machine gun fell silent. Sindayen's men followed him, forming a stronger defense on the right flank. The advancing enemy was stymied. Lts. Badal and Kalbit followed suit from the side of the forest to surround the enemy. Still, the guerrillas remained outnumbered and outgunned.

While the attempts of the Japanese to press their attack proved costly for them, they still had enough men to serve as cannon fodder. Meanwhile three of their five barges had returned to Bongao. Obviously their game plan was for the main force to rout the guerrillas, whom they rightly suspected were trapped in Manukmangka with no chance of escape and no reinforcements forthcoming, since they controlled the sea.

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\* Japanese knee mortars were short-range artillery pieces, about two feet long and firing an explosive projectile in a high arch trajectory. They were light and could easily be maneuvered. We usually fired the captured ones by firmly basing them on the ground (Japanese mortar men usually based them on padded knees).

But the guerrillas were resolute in defending their island, and they were ready to die for it.

As Capt. Frayna's injury hampered his movements, Capt. Sindayen practically took over the command. The battle raged until the afternoon when the guerrillas were pushed back to the edge of the village where they dug foxholes for their final stand. The enemy tried house-to-house mopping-up operations but the guerrillas easily picked them off, killing them one by one. Late in the afternoon, the enemy started to retreat. What the guerrillas didn't know was that in the din of the battle, they did not notice that the pilot of a lone American fighter bomber returning to base from a bombing raid saw the two enemy barges, made a low pass and dropped his remaining bombs, sinking one of the vessels. Seeing one of their barges destroyed, the enemy contacted their base in Bongao which in turn ordered their withdrawal. That night several barges arrived from Bongao to fetch them. While waiting they formed a well-protected enclave at the beach. The entire enemy force left that night, taking with them their dead. An estimated 100 Japanese troops were killed in the Manukmangka fighting.

From the Manukmangka encounter, the enemy must have deduced that even in the face of overwhelming odds, the guerrillas were determined to turn the tide of the battle in their favor at all costs, using mostly ambushes where the island fighters enjoyed the upper hand. The capture of Patukul Pullah, a Japanese puppet policeman, by the guerrillas led to the confirmation of intelligence reports that the enemy landed 700 men to assault the Freedom Fighters trapped in Manukmangka.

Immediately after the Manukmangka encounter, Capt. Frayna was recalled to Bato-Bato to recuperate, while Capt. Sindayen was sent to take over command of the 1st Battalion Infantry Regiment on Jolo island where heavy fighting was still raging. Upon arrival, Sindayen immediately established his command post at Buntod, located at the central spine of the island.

One week after the Manukmangka battle, the Japanese high command in Tawi-Tawi withdrew its forces in Ubol and Sibutu to the main base in Bongao which, in addition to Sanga-Sanga, were the only territories still under their control. Even then, Sanga-Sanga and the airfield were under siege by the guerrillas under Capt. Guligado and Lt. Lukman. The guerrilla warriors in Manukmangka were then deployed to reinforce Guligado and Lukman in Sanga-Sanga.

### **Flight From Tawi-Tawi To Borneo**

On 13 January, the guerrilla forces on Sibutu Island intercepted a big group of Japanese troops aboard kumpit trying to escape to Borneo from Tawi-Tawi. Reports had it that 33 of the Japanese were slain, including their commanding officer and a radio operator, and several others were wounded. The guerrillas' "trophies" of war consisted of two sabers, pistols, rifles and grenades. The local warriors suffered no casualty. From that incident it was believed that the Japanese were finally fleeing Tawi-Tawi after suffering heavy losses.

On 15 February a strong enemy force from Bongao arrived in Simunul aboard two barges and tried to land at Tongusong. They were greeted with heavy firing from the island defenders led by Capt. Ratag, forcing them to withdraw. The enemy tried it again with a stronger force two days later, but Capt. Ratag and his men repulsed their attempt anew. Again, casualties were numerous on the Japanese side.

Taking advantage of their control of the seas, an enemy barge loaded with troops and towing a kumpit full of puppet policemen attacked the guerrilla camp at Parangan near Bongao under Lt. Datiles. The Freedom Fighters, however, were ready for them, damaging the barge and sinking the kumpit, killing all the policemen on board. The island defenders were practically unscathed. Two days later Lt. Datiles's troops ambushed a Japanese barge steaming close to the beach in Parangan. The exchange of fire lasted for about one hour resulting in victory for the guerrillas.

On 18 March, a 50-man force of guerrillas under Capt. Guligado and Lt. Lukman waylaid some 200 Japanese troops in Tubig Basag east of the airfield, inflicting heavy casualties. The encounter, which developed into a running gun battle, continued as the ambushers were joined by Lt. Ylanan's 30-man band.

The guerrillas, however, were forced to withdraw under heavy shelling from the western slope of the Bongao mountain overlooking the battle site. The local warriors suffered 14 killed and 3 wounded, while casualties on the enemy side were described as heavy. Two guerrillas who were seriously wounded were later evacuated to Leyte.

### **Japanese on the Run in Tawi-Tawi**

The guerrillas continued to pounce on the enemy at every turn with encouraging results. In Tawi-Tawi the Japanese continued to suffer

serious reverses, sending them scampering to Borneo aboard commandeered kumpit. Sometime in March eight kumpit loaded with Japanese troops were reported to be cruising along the coast of Sibutu for Borneo 30 miles away. They were pursued by the guerrillas stationed in Sibutu under the command of Lts. Abdul and Alibasa, who sank two of the boats and damaged the others. The rest of the seacraft managed to reach Lahat Datu and Tarakan in Borneo. The island fighters recovered mortars, rifles, grenades, several rounds of ammunition, and seven sacks of rice.

On 30 March 1945 the guerrilla forces under the command of Capt. Guligado and Lt. Lukman assaulted the last Japanese garrison of 30 men in Sanga-Sanga, killing most of the defenders. The entire Sanga-Sanga area including the airfield had been liberated by the guerrillas.

### **American Forces' Landing in Sanga-Sanga**

On 2 April 1945 the 163rd Regimental Combat Team, 41st Infantry (Sunset) Division, U.S. Army, commanded by Col. Monroney, landed in Sanga-Sanga 4 miles west of Bongao without a single shot being fired. Col. Alejandro Suarez and his men were on the beach to welcome them.

With the guerrilla forces closely supporting them the Americans lost no time in attacking the Japanese fortifications in Bongao. The enemy expected the Americans to land on the southwestern part of the island, but they were dead wrong because the assault came from the opposite side, which rendered their defenses ineffective. Most of the Japanese forces in Tawi-Tawi had retreated to the heavily fortified island of Bongao.

Bongao mountain was replete with caves which the enemy had fortified. The hillsides were dotted with big gun emplacements and machine gun nests which the Americans promptly destroyed with artillery fire and bombs as soon as they were discovered. The battle raged for one week as enemy positions were persistently attacked by joint American and guerrilla forces. When the Japanese began retreating to the saddle and slopes of the mountain, the main American invading force withdrew to join the rest of the regiment attacking Jolo island. The dislodging of enemy troops from their bunkers and fortified caves was left mostly to the Sulu warriors.

The remaining American forces, called the "White Task Force," were left to garrison Sanga-Sanga to secure the captured airfield. The

upgraded airstrip became busier than ever. My brother, Lt. Romulo Espaldon, guerrilla battalion intelligence officer in Bongao, was given the additional designation of liaison officer with the White Task Force.

Back with my unit, on the fourth day of the attack on Bongao, Capt. Tier and I left our Balimbing mountaintop station for Bongao where he reported to the intelligence officer of the liberation force. After the meeting we returned to Balimbing to pack up. The Americans were recalled while my unit returned to our Bato-Bato headquarters.

After a day's rest I was ordered to report to Capt. Ismael Ratag, newly assigned commander of the guerrilla forces in Bongao; he replaced Capt. Luis Frayna who had to be evacuated to Leyte because of new injuries sustained in the Bongao fighting. Meanwhile the Japanese troops were concentrated at the saddle and slope of Bongao mountain.

I found out that less than one-half of the original members of "H" Co., my former unit, were left. Others had been transferred to other units.

I was assigned with Lt. Datiles to an advance area about 300 yards from the saddle of the mountain with 50 men each, occupying two small hills with two pillboxes the enemy had built, facing the clearing where they expected U.S. forces to land. Separating us from the wooded areas at the slope and the saddle where the main enemy force was concentrated was a 200-yard-wide clearing covered with secondary growth.

At 0800H, 7 April, my unit was assigned to join an American patrol on a probing mission towards the saddle area. We were forced to withdraw when the enemy attacked us as we entered the forest close to the saddle. Our patrol suffered 3 men killed and 6 wounded. The next day a bigger patrol of 60 men, led by Capt. Guligado, was again deployed to probe the enemy position in the same area. They ran into an ambush and lost 13 men, and several others were wounded including Guligado who sustained a wound in the abdomen.

Lt. Datiles and I had to keep our men always on red alert in our advance positions as the first few days were marked with regular encounters, especially after sundown. The enemy would sneak into our camp and fighting would take place once we noticed their presence. Otherwise they would just withdraw as silently as they had come. Because of these nocturnal intrusions we braced for an attack, expecting even a Banzai assault. But none came. A lull before the storm?



Then one evening Lt. Datiles espied three Japanese soldiers near him, cautiously backtracking. Datiles shot the intruders dead and, to his surprise, found each of them with a bag of canned goods. The mystery of the enemy's nocturnal visits was thus unraveled.

Exactly one year ago that week the guerrillas were on the run. We were the hunted; the Japanese the hunters. Not a few of the resistance fighters were executed after they were captured while foraging for food. The Japanese then were also hard pressed at trying to penetrate our jungle redoubts, and had to pay a high price for every unsuccessful attempt that they undertook. At the time, the enemy also had garrisons surrounding Tawi-Tawi island.

In the new situation, everything was changed. It was the enemy who was on the run. They became the hunted; we, the guerrillas, the hunters. Our roles had been reversed. They had to scrounge around for food and risk their lives doing so. The guerrillas likewise had to pay dearly for each unsuccessful attempt to run over the Japanese jungle lairs. And the Freedom Fighters had cordoned Bongao island with guerrilla outposts, just like the Japanese cordoned Tawi-Tawi the previous year.

After solving the mystery of the nocturnal intrusions into our camp, we searched out their food storage in our area of responsibility and discovered two caves filled with boxes of canned fish, salted meat, vegetables, rice and noodles. Two other caves contained a cache of knee mortars, shells, grenades and "woodpecker" machine guns that sounded like woodpeckers pecking by their rapidity when fired. We hauled off the precious finds to our S-4 stations. Datiles and I retained for our own use several knee mortars and boxes of mortar shells.

Our capture of their food supply apparently resulted in an acute food shortage for the enemy as, henceforth, we would see a procession of lamps along the mountainside at night, moving like fireflies. We would pump them with mortar shells whenever they came within range. By then we had mastered the use of their knee mortars. We'd make direct hits and near misses, as indicated by the ensuing small fires at the target sites. We patrolled the areas the following morning and picked up war trophies such as Japanese pistols, sabers, and canned goods.

In retrospect, it was a cruel thing to do—killing starving human beings. Yet, a year ago, not a few of our comrades went through the very same punishment.

In our search-and-destroy operations, the unit commanders often took the initiative to clear their areas of any Japanese holdouts. I had more than my fair share of the search-and-destroy patrols that even my brother Romulo had confided his concern about my safety to mutual friends. He thought that I was pushing my luck too far.

### **Surrender Feelers from the Enemy**

We received an intelligence report stating that the main Japanese force in Bongao would surrender on 15 April 1945, suggesting as the place of surrender a wooded area close to the entrance to the mountain saddle. After Capt. Ratag and my brother, Lt. Romulo Espaldon, consulted with the White Task Force about this unexpected development, Ratag ordered his men to accept Japanese troops giving themselves up.

The surrender date came and Lt. Abdulhamid Lukman of "A" Co. and Lt. Romulo Espaldon were deployed to patrol the designated spot and accept any enemy wanting to turn himself in. My unit, being closest to the designated area, was ordered to provide close support to Lukman and my brother.

Lts. Lukman and Espaldon gathered in my area before dawn, along with 70 of their men. At sunrise they started marching towards the rendezvous with my unit following closely behind. I was uncannily apprehensive. Perhaps it was because that was the first time that my brother and I went out on patrol together. I also realized the Japanese were known for their treachery and deceit. Add to that the unsolicited advice given to me the night before by one of my men, a religious Muslim leader, Panglima Jamilul. He said his reading of the stars and the clouds called for extreme caution.

As we cautiously approached the entrance to the saddle the trail forked. The left path leading to the saddle was notorious as an ambush site of the enemy. Lukman and my brother followed it until their units disappeared among the foliage. We took the path to the right that led to an elevated clearing 50 yards away.

I deployed my 30-man unit in an area which had a commanding view of the valley at the front, and the forest to the left. We were looking forward to an uneventful surrender of the Japanese. We found two old bomb craters which we used as foxholes since they seemed to provide good cover.

Hardly had we settled down in our positions when we heard the report of a gun, followed shortly by machine gun chatter towards our left. I smelled an ambush. I was particularly concerned because there was no response from the guerrillas' side.

After setting our knee mortar, we opened fire at the calculated location of the machine gunner. After lobbing about a dozen mortar shells, firing from BARs, thompson submachine guns and carbines became evident. The exchange of fire lasted for about thirty minutes. I continued directing my mortar fire towards the saddle entrance even after the chatter of machine gun fire had ceased. Then there was calm. The ambushed guerrillas must have extracted themselves. We guarded our position for another hour before I gave the order to withdraw, by a different route, and then returned to our bivouac area. Lts. Lukman and Espaldon were back with their men by then.

Lukman's patrol sustained heavy losses; many were killed and wounded. The intelligence report about the surrender was only a ruse to keep the guerrillas off guard. It was a dirty trick, but in war all is fair. We learned a costly lesson.

What occurred during the encounter was that Lukman and Espaldon with their men were moving cautiously in the direction of the saddle when they came across a lone, naked Japanese, except for tattered underwear, waving a white flag. Lukman beckoned the Japanese to approach, which he did. The lone enemy spoke in Japanese as if looking for someone. He refused to deal with Lukman. The latter pointed to Espaldon, whom the Japanese also ignored. Perhaps he was looking for an American officer to surrender to or kill.

Suddenly the Japanese grabbed a grenade from his crotch. Before he could detonate it, he was shot dead. Firing immediately opened up from two machine gun nests nearby.

The guerrillas hit the ground and were pinned down, unable to fire back for about 10 minutes. They had already sustained initial casualties. My brother told me later that several of his men beside him were killed and every bullet kicked dirt all around him. It was a close call. Soon there were successive explosions on the enemy's side, causing the machine gun chatter to stop temporarily. This pause allowed the guerrillas to respond with everything they had. The exchange of fire continued for 20 minutes more. Meanwhile mortar shells continued to explode in the enemy's concealed positions and behind them, giving Lukman and

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his men the chance to disengage and withdraw. They were not able to retrieve their dead.

After the ambush other reports of the enemy wanting to surrender were always taken as a ruse, and guerrilla patrols treated them accordingly. Two other similar incidents followed, but each time the lone Japanese soldier carrying the white flag was silently killed by hacking, using the razor-sharp kris or barong which guerrilla warriors usually carried—especially during mopping-up operations. This silent execution allowed the guerrilla warriors to initiate the firing on suspected enemy ambush positions, or just withdraw to avoid an ambush.

On 22 April 1945 Cpl. Iting Sarabi with four men chanced upon an unsuspecting enemy patrol of 12 men in Pababag across from Bongao wharf, and annihilated the enemy force. Except for occasional skirmishes the enemy avoided combat contact with the guerrilla forces that had now surrounded Bongao island.

Then on 1 May 1945, under cover of darkness, an enemy suicide squad probed guerrilla positions in the southwestern coast of Bongao Island, killing eight men under Sgt. Luis Flores with bayonets and sabers. They withdrew without a shot fired. This was followed four days later by a larger enemy force attacking the guerrilla unit guarding the back door to the south in the Pahut area, killing seven.

Operating silently in the dark, using bayonets and sabers, the enemy inflicted more casualties on the guerrillas. The mortar unit under Lt. Fausto Bernardino was forced to withdraw to the shore one night and allowed supporting units to battle the unseen enemy. A similar strategy took place again, this time in the eastern sector. These attacks were part of a strategy for a major move the enemy was to make in the following days.

On 10 May 1945, with a full moon, the tide at its height, and the current at the Bongao-Sibutu channel swiftest, the whole remaining Japanese force on Bongao—numbering close to 1,000 men—made its final move. On about 50 large rafts made of bamboo and logs which they carried through the unguarded narrow western shore, they allowed the swift current to take them towards Borneo only 30 miles away. They had studied the currents and would not miss north Borneo if everything went well. But things did not go well for them.

In an early patrol the next morning a guerrilla unit came across the dead body of Kaliama, a civilian Japanese carpenter who had lived in

Bongao for many years; he had married a local girl. Apparently the Japanese troops no longer had any use for him and executed him as he tried to escape. When it was found, his body was in rigor mortis.

Another guerrilla patrol came across a civilian, still dazed, who had succeeded in escaping from the Japanese a few hours earlier. He gave the information about the escape of the entire enemy force on bamboo and log rafts during the night. Patrols were immediately ordered into the saddle of the mountain to check the information given by the captive.

Since our units were closest to the saddle, Lt. Datiles and I led our men cautiously and entered the mountain saddle, finding it vacated. We moved on as the terrain gradually rose and soon we reached a slope dotted with pillboxes connected with trenches. Equipment, supplies, boxes of grenades and some firearms had been left behind.

In several clearings covered by a thick canopy of trees were empty wooden buildings which had been used as barracks. Trails led to empty storage caves. At higher elevations we came across caves connected with trench-like excavations. On one side farther up was a large cave that we suspected was the command post. Any attack on this fortified mountain would have been very costly.

With no evidence of the enemy's presence, we climbed higher until we reached the clearing at the top of the mountain where the view was majestic. For a moment we forgot the reason for our being there.

Back to reality, we immediately returned to our camp to report no contact with the enemy, and confirmed the escape of the entire enemy force. This information was relayed by the liaison officer, Lt. Romulo Espaldon, to the White Task Force commander in Sanga-Sanga. Soon planes took off from the Sanga-Sanga airfield to intercept the enemy in the high seas. Simultaneously two P.T. boats moored close by in the channel separating Bongao and Sanga-Sanga slipped from their moorings and raced towards the open sea.

Other guerrilla units moved into the saddle and mountain's forest by different trails, only to confirm what we had discovered. When the P.T. boats overtook the bamboo rafts, most of the rafts carried only dead bodies. The planes had already done their strafing sweeps. The P.T. boats also had their share in the carnage.

I was in Sanga-Sanga early that afternoon and saw only two truck-loads of scared, drenched prisoners leaving the two P.T. boats. Out of

the 1,000 Japanese troops, only two truckloads had survived. What happened on the high sea was the talk of the camp for the next few days.

Truly, war dehumanizes man, removes his scruples about taking lives. Brutality was not the monopoly of the enemy! The two truckloads of Japanese soldiers taken from the drifting bamboo rafts, and some of those who succeeded in escaping by kumpit to Borneo earlier, may have been the only survivors in the entire Tawi-Tawi campaign.

Such captures practically ended the war in the southern part of Sulu province. However, fighting in Jolo was still raging fiercely.

### **Cagayan de Sulu Garrisoned**

In May 1945, as the guerrilla offensive in Tawi-Tawi was coming to a close, there were intelligence reports that Japanese troops were operating in Cagayan de Sulu. This group of islands was approximately 180 miles northeast of Tawi-Tawi. The enemy force could have been from Palawan or from other provinces in the Visayas, escaping to Borneo.

Two years earlier a guerrilla patrol of 12 men, led by Capt. Guy Strattan, was dispatched to Cagayan de Sulu to arrest Japanese puppet Mayor Salip Atari and to capture firearms of his police force, badly needed by the fledgling Sulu guerrilla organization. The patrol faced annihilation when Mayor Atari escaped to Sandakan and returned with a strong Japanese force of 80 men to attack the guerrilla patrol. But Capt. Strattan and his men successfully eluded encirclement and barely escaped total destruction.

With the recent report of enemy troops operating in Cagayan de Sulu, Col. Suarez this time dispatched a strong guerrilla force of 80 men armed with 30-cal. machine guns, mortars and BARs under the command of Lt. Romulo Espaldon, to attack the enemy and prevent them from taking refuge on the islands. Espaldon was also ordered to capture the wily Japanese puppet Mayor, Salip Atari. But Espaldon's force failed to battle the enemy; they had left a day earlier for Borneo, taking with them the puppet mayor.

Having denied the enemy the use of Cagayan de Sulu as a refuge or sanctuary, Lt. Espaldon became the military administrator of this group of islands. While he was there the young guerrilla commander became romantically involved with a beautiful American mestiza whose American father had been murdered by the puppet mayor. Learning of his



local romantic involvement, Col. Suarez, mindful of the potential of the promising junior officer, ordered Capt. Maximiniano Velasquez, SAC Adjutant, to find a solution.

Soon an order was received by Lt. Espaldon which read, "You are hereby ordered to proceed immediately to Camp Olivas, Pampanga and report to the commanding officer, cooks and bakers school, for training." Camp Olivas was approximately 600 miles to the north. It was an order and the young officer had to comply. He was off for his new assignment in no time.

A diligent student, Espaldon took his new task seriously and at the end of the three-month course graduated at the top of his class. He was returning to Sulu with other officers bound for Mindanao when, at the airport, an urgent message was handed to him: "As top graduate of your class, you have been appointed instructor in the cooks and bakers school. You are hereby ordered to report back to Camp Olivas."

Again, he had to comply. The following day, headlines in the newspapers read: "Military Plane Bound For Mindanao Crashes. No Survivors."

After working for a month as an instructor, Espaldon requested to be reverted to inactive status. Then he enrolled as an engineering student in one of the local universities.

While attending college he and some of his classmates were invited to take a qualifying examination for the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, and he was among those who topped the examination. The next four years found him with a batch of 50 Filipino cadets at the academy. He graduated with honors and decided to join the Philippine Navy.

A diligent and serious officer, he was promoted rapidly. Espaldon became the first officer in the Philippine Navy to attain the rank of rear admiral, and later on became the first governor of the newly created provinces of Tawi-Tawi and Basilan.



## Chapter X **The Liberation of Siasi and Jolo Island**

### **Siasi's Liberation**

**I**n September 1943, after relentless enemy assaults by air, sea and land, the Freedom Fighters in Siasi withdrew to the thickly wooded island of Tawi-Tawi and joined the main Sulu guerrilla force. Japanese troops occupied Siasi and Luuk Mandana on the adjacent island of Lapak. They were supported by the Japanese puppet Mayor, Datu Idiris Amerhussin and his police force.

Even before American liberation forces landed in Leyte on 22 October 1944, guerrilla units started infiltrating enemy-occupied territories. Col. Suarez dispatched Lt. Saberalam Maut, a native of Siasi, to assess the military situation there. With him was Sgt. Nassal Alian. Stopping in Babuyan island before reaching Siasi, Maut and Alian encountered armed pro-Japanese policemen; they killed several of the enemy and caused the rest to flee.

After conferring with guerrilla bands and intelligence agents in Siasi, they returned to the guerrilla headquarters in Cula-Cula to make their report. Soon after, an expeditionary force under the command of Capt. Abdulrahim Imao was sent to attack enemy forces entrenched in Siasi town and Luuk Maulana. Capt. Maut joined the expeditionary force.

The Freedom Fighters landed at Sipanding and Muso, and guerrillas already in Siasi joined forces with Capt. Imao. Imao had 500 men under his command. The Japanese forces in Siasi numbered about 1,000. They were reinforced by the puppet Mayor, Datu Idiris, and his men, which were about 100. Although outnumbered and outgunned, Capt. Imao and his men made simultaneous attacks on enemy positions on 10 November 1944. The Japanese forces stubbornly resisted the assaults, and the guerrilla forces failed to dislodge the enemy.

Meanwhile, elements of forces under Lts. Sabtal Usman and Mahonton Itum assaulted Luuk Maulana on the adjacent island of Lapak.

The defenders also repulsed the attack. At Jambangan, however, guerrilla forces annihilated a platoon of pro-Japanese Jutais (native auxiliary marine unit), while at Nipa-Nipa Lt. Asgali Usman ambushed a Japanese force of 50 men. In the fight, the Japanese suffered 12 dead and 9 wounded; they failed to retrieve their dead. Lt. Asgali Usman was wounded in the encounter, and lost several of his men.

As the guerrilla offensive was going on, a lone American bomber flew low over Siasi town and was fired at by the enemy with their cal. .50 machine guns. The crippled plane crashed at Barrio Muso, killing the pilot and six of the crew instantly. Only one unconscious crewman survived. The name "Sgt. Long" was printed on his uniform. Capt. Maut immediately got a fast sailboat and brought the American to the guerrilla headquarters at Cula-Cula, 10 hours away. Maut's wife, Emerita, who was also a guerrilla, took care of the injured man on the trip. The sailboat had to avoid sealanes frequented by enemy armed barges.

When the boat reached Cula-Cula, American forces in Leyte were notified by radio about the plane's survivor and in a few hours a seaplane arrived, landing close to where Capt. Maut's boat was moored. By this time Sgt. Long had regained consciousness. He was airlifted to Leyte. Meanwhile in Muso the pilot of the ill-fated bomber and the crew were given a decent burial by the Siasi guerrillas.

On 13 November at 0500H, two kumpit loaded with guerrillas commanded by Capt. Yasin Bagis of the 3rd Battalion, heading for Maimbung to open another front on Jolo island, were ambushed by Japanese forces at Pangdan, Tapul, in the Siasi sector. The enemy positioned themselves behind coconut trees. They inflicted casualties on Capt. Bagis's forces, killing one and wounding several, including Lt. Saldin Alibasa, who was wounded on the face. Civilians reported later that the enemy sustained four killed and several wounded.

On 15 November the Siasi Freedom Fighters resumed their attack on entrenched enemy positions in Siasi town, this time using rifle grenades. They scored direct hits on enemy barracks and ammunition dumps, causing explosions, but the Japanese force repulsed the second attack. A few days later, a Japanese launch loaded with troops, passing near the shores of Tulleng, was attacked by guerrilla forces armed with BARs and TSMGs. The launch careened as it was peppered with hot lead. The enemy sustained heavy casualties. Not knowing what had transpired earlier in Tulleng, another Japanese launch moving close to shore

was ambushed and subjected to intense fire by guerrillas. All men on deck were killed, but the vessel escaped.

All enemy positions were now subjected to constant attack. On 30 November 1944 Cpl. Gervacio Rapisora, who had always wanted to do something spectacular for his unit, allowed himself to drift with floating debris along Siasi Channel under cover of darkness. Upon reaching a moored enemy barge that was heavily guarded, he blasted the seacraft with a hand grenade. This meant one less armed vessel to patrol Siasi waters. Days later a civilian headman of Laminosa Island, south of Siasi, captured three Japanese survivors from a destroyed Japanese ship in the open sea. Delivered to the guerrilla headquarters in Tawi-Tawi were seized mortars and shells, rifle and grenades.

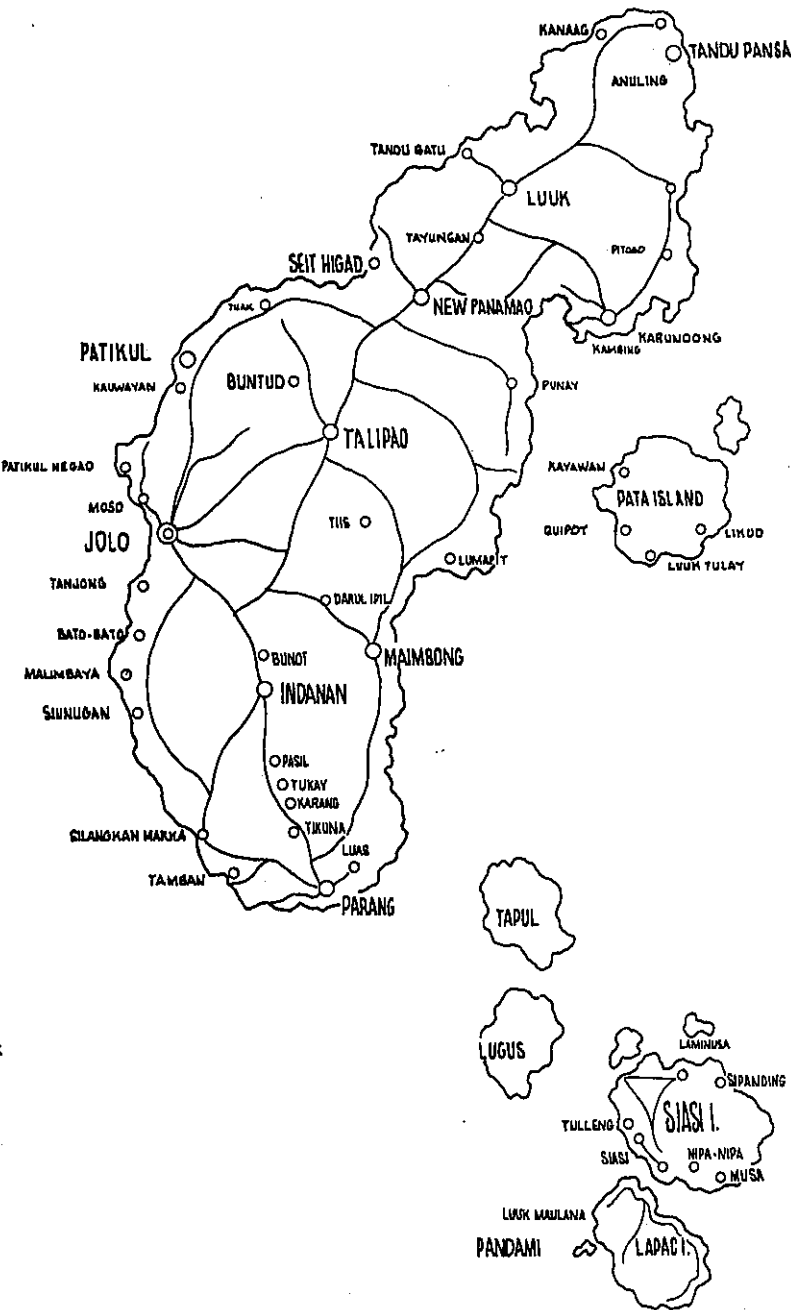
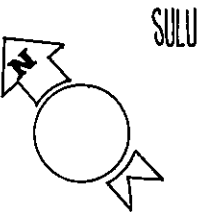
Before the year ended, patriots on Lapak Island ambushed a Japanese force of 50 men, inflicting heavy casualties. The enemy failed to retrieve their dead. On the same day, Guyutais (native auxiliary marines) numbering 11 were also ambushed and annihilated. The guerrillas suffered no casualties.

On 12 January 1945 a strong Japanese force of 70 men, reinforced by puppet auxiliary marines, left their entrenched position in Luuk Maulana and attacked guerrilla positions in Pandami. The attack was repulsed and the enemy suffered heavy casualties. One guerrilla was killed and several wounded.

In an effort to blunt frequent ambushes, the Japanese forces in Siasi, reinforced by 260 troops from Jolo, attacked a guerrilla concentration in Pandami on 20 January 1945. The enemy succeeded in dislodging the forces of Lts. Sabtal Usman and Paraji Usman from their first line of defense. The guerrillas braced for another attack and received some reinforcement from Lt. Eleno Colinares and his men. The enemy returned to attack two days later, but this time were repulsed, and made a disorderly withdrawal along the coast of Luuk Maulana. The guerrillas pursued them, but heavy machine gun and mortar fire effectively covered the Japanese withdrawal. In spite of their advantage in number and superiority of arms, they found the guerrillas willing to take them on in open combat.

A bizarre situation unfolded one early morning, on 8 February 1945, in the sea fronting Luuk Maulana. Patrolling on a kumpit mounted with a cal. .30 machine gun, a guerrilla force caught 27 vintas (native canoes) loaded with Japanese troops withdrawing to Jolo island. The

# SULU



enemy had delayed their departure to dynamite schools of fish. The seacraft patrol cornered them and raked them with their cal. 30 machine gun. The unsuspecting enemy lost three canoes immediately. The rest of the vintas frantically dispersed and fled to shore. Some of the Japanese soldiers who swam became easy targets of small arms fire. The enemy suffered heavily.

Imao and his men learned from his agents and captured puppet policemen that the Siasi Japanese force was starting to withdraw to Jolo. Fearing ambush on land, the enemy used armed barges to attack guerrilla coastal positions in Sibaud, Pandami and Lugas.

On 17 February 1945 at about 1600H, Lt. Indanan Utuanni with 40 of his men from "H" Co. attacked the enemy stronghold of Luuk Maulana. The enemy had held on tenaciously to the cotta or fortification. Datu Idris, the puppet mayor, and his men were in close support of the Japanese forces. The Japanese troops and geyutais were silenced after about 30 minutes of sustained rifle and machine gun fire. However the guerrillas failed to dislodge them. The next day at 1600H the Japanese retaliated by shelling and strafing the guerrilla camps on Lapak island. The guerrillas took advantage of their cover and sustained no casualties.

Within the week a large patrol led by Lts. Indanan Utuanni and Basa Jawali attacked the Japanese stronghold in the old Spanish fort on Siganggang mountain. The aggressive guerrilla assault caused the Japanese defenders to flee. The attackers pursued the enemy in a running battle, but again machine gun and mortar fire held back the guerrillas from decimating the enemy. Later, the fort, cleared again of enemy occupiers by another patrol, led by Lts. Basa Jawali and Jamasli Usman, was put to the torch to prevent the Japanese forces from reoccupying it.

On 24 January 1945 a strong enemy force of 400 men under Lts. Tanaka Sato and Kondo attacked guerrilla positions on Lapak island that had been successfully ambushing Japanese patrols. The defenders sustained several casualties but held their positions.

Even after several guerrilla assaults, Luuk Maulana was still under enemy control. Then in late February 1945 a guerrilla patrol from "H" Co., probing the area, noted only Japanese puppet policemen defending the fort. In a brief but pitched skirmish the police force of about 20 men was annihilated. The guerrillas suffered no casualties.

The Japanese force had by now withdrawn to their main defense position in Siasi town. The aggressive ambushes by guerrilla forces in

Siasi decimated the Japanese forces. Early in March 1945 the enemy force in the Siasi sector was ordered to withdraw to Jolo. There was intense fighting going on in Jolo as the guerrillas attacked it with impunity. Other Japanese units in Siasi that failed to join the main force in retreating to Jolo Island had to fend for themselves. Some tried to escape from Siasi by sailboat.

With fighting in the Siasi sector over, guerrilla units were reassigned to the Jolo campaign. The withdrawal to Jolo island of the decimated Japanese forces in Siasi virtually ended the fighting in this area. Siasi was liberated.

### **Pfc. Ben Rodriguez**

With the liberation of Tawi-Tawi sector, and fighting still raging on Jolo island, the Sulu area command headquarters was transferred from Tawi-Tawi to Jolo town. Among the last to leave the headquarters at Tawi-Tawi were Cpl. Jailani Waraji and Pfc. Benjamin Rodriguez. Early in May 1945 they were ordered to report to Jolo, with the remaining headquarters' records and supplies.

They took a small kumpit and sailed for Jolo, 120 miles north. Assisting them was a young recruit, Pvt. Tobing Mongo. Their sail caught wind and they thought they would have a good time during the journey. However, about halfway between Tawi-Tawi and Siasi, off Maningkalat island, the wind changed direction and the three men had to row towards Siasi. As they inched their way, Rodriguez noticed a canoe with its sail up coming in the opposite direction and heading towards their kumpit. The sail of the canoe partly concealed its occupants.

As the canoe approached closer, Ben Rodriguez noticed that the exposed extremities of the occupants were light but suntanned. This was when he suspected that they were Japanese. He shouted, "Jipon," meaning Japanese. Cpl. Jailani Waraji, who was at the kumpit's stern, also noticed the enemy raising their rifles. Waraji started shooting with his Austin submachine gun, killing four immediately. The fifth was able to jump into the water and was shot dead by Ben Rodriguez, but not before the Japanese succeeded in lobbing a hand grenade into the kumpit.

The grenade exploded in the kumpit, killing the young recruit instantly. He fell on Rodriguez, who was also wounded by grenade shrapnel in his right thigh. The steel fragment must have lacerated the femo-

ral vessels because Rodriguez's wound bled profusely. Waraji tied his undershirt tightly over Rodriguez's wound and this partly controlled the hemorrhage.

Since he was paddling the kumpit alone, it took Waraji four hours to reach the closest inhabited island where he asked for help, and another four hours to reach Siasi for medical attention. Meanwhile Rodriguez lapsed into shock from blood loss.

Transferred to another sailboat, and suffering another six hours delay, Rodriguez reached Jolo town where he was rushed to the Jolo Central School which had been converted into an emergency hospital. There he was held for three days, then airlifted to Zamboanga City. A waiting ambulance rushed him to the Zamboanga Normal School, now a hospital. Here Cpl. Rodriguez received better medical attention.

During his stay in the hospital, however, he heard the doctors mention the words "gangrene" and "amputation." This worried the patient to no end. In about three weeks he was flown to Leyte, and it took several more days of preoperative care before he underwent surgery. His leg was saved. In the next few months the war ended, but not for Ben Rodriguez. He had to stay in Leyte for another six months for recuperation and rehabilitation.

He was recommended for the Purple Heart, but the award has eluded him to this date. Ben Rodriguez managed to continue his education after the war and completed journalism at Silliman University. I had the privilege of meeting him in his plush office as I was writing the draft of this book, and we reminisced about World War II in Sulu. He is now the editor-in-chief of the *Manila Bulletin*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in the Philippines.

### **Liberation of Jolo Island**

In late October 1944 after the American forces landed in Leyte, Col. Suarez started sending his troops to Jolo island to infiltrate enemy-occupied areas and to spur civilian support for the impending guerrilla offensive. Among those sent ahead were Tausug warriors Lts. Nain Usman and Abtahi Istino and Sgt. Arastam Maang, with some of their key men. They were among the Tapikan warriors who had survived the worst the enemy could dish out.



The effect on young Tausug volunteers of seeing the Tapikan guerrilla warriors brandishing new automatic weapons was electrifying. It was said that the Moros loved their arms more than their wives, and that they lived to fight. Even before the American liberation forces landed, guerrilla warriors began ambushing enemy patrols. In turn, Japanese forces aggressively attacked them whenever and wherever they could.

On 30 October 1944 at about 0800H, 40 Japanese troops attacked the guerrilla concentration at Kapang. The guerrillas withdrew, offering no resistance. In the afternoon, the guerrillas, now armed with automatic weapons, mounted a surprise counterattack. Taken by surprise, the enemy force was annihilated.

On 9 November 1944, from 0700H to 0900H, a Japanese patrol of 50 men shelled and machine gunned Buntod in Tiis, Jolo, a suspected guerrilla camp. They, however, failed to follow up with troop assault. No casualties were inflicted on the Freedom Fighters.

The following day at 0400H a guerrilla patrol under Lts. Sabtal Usman and Mahonton Itum raided Pangutaran island, 20 miles northwest of Jolo island, and disarmed a strong puppet police force. No resistance was offered. On 15 November a suspected guerrilla camp of "I" Co., 3rd Battalion, on Tumantangis mountain was shelled for four hours. The enemy must have been edgy. They had the wrong intelligence information on the exact location of the guerrillas.

Two days later Sgt. Arastam Maang with 40 men from "K" Co. ambushed a strong Japanese patrol of about a hundred men that had left its garrison at Tubig Samin. The enemy sustained 17 killed and many wounded. With the guerrillas' continuous automatic fire the Japanese were forced to withdraw, leaving their dead behind.

On 18 November another unit from the 3rd Battalion intercepted and destroyed a Japanese truck loaded with rice commandeered from civilians, and all occupants, including puppet officials, were killed.

Bringing the fight to the enemy, Sgt. Arastam Maang and his men attacked the Japanese garrison manned by over a hundred men at Tubig Samin on 19 November. The enemy repulsed the guerrillas' assault but suffered heavy casualties. Unknown to the guerrilla fighters, the Japanese force abandoned their garrison that evening. When Maang and his warriors resumed the attack the following morning, they found the enemy gone. Guns, supplies, and first aid equipment littered the hastily abandoned camp.

Two days later in another sector a guerrilla patrol joined by civilian volunteers led by Moro Pungutan, a former outlaw from Silangkan, attacked the enemy at Pandak, Silangkan. Taken by surprise, the enemy suffered over 40 casualties. They failed to retrieve their dead. Japanese rifles, helmets, bayonets and other supplies were captured. The guerrillas suffered only 1 dead and 2 seriously wounded.

On 21 November at Maimbung, Mohammad Murasi, a guerrilla sympathizer who wanted to join the underground movement, saw an opportunity to get even with the invaders and hacked a Japanese soldier. He tried to go after another before escaping, but Murasi was captured, tortured and executed. On the same day Pvt. Hamid Dugasan, who was returning to his unit in Silangkan alone, noticed an approaching Japanese patrol and decided to ambush it. He felled several of the enemy, and the Japanese never knew where the shooting came from.

The guerrillas were stepping up their operations even before the main forces from Tawi-Tawi arrived. In the last two days of November more encounters took place. Freedom fighters based in Luuk ambushed three truckloads of enemy troops. The guerrillas lobbed grenades at the first truck and concentrated their fire on the second truck as it slowed down to avoid hitting the damaged truck. With continuous automatic fire the enemy was completely annihilated. The guerrillas suffered minimal casualties. In Indanan a patrol of over 20 Japanese kempetais was ambushed and annihilated. The patriots got all the enemy's arms, ammunition and clothing.

By the end of the month a guerrilla patrol waiting in ambush in Maimbung engaged an enemy patrol of 30 men. The Japanese force was caught unaware, leaving behind 10 of their dead. Captured were arms, including a light machine gun, knee mortar and ammunition. During the month of November guerrilla forces were bringing the fight to the enemy by staging a series of ambushes, regardless of the size of the enemy patrols. The guerrilla fighters, however, were still outnumbered and outgunned.

On 1 December 1944, a small guerrilla patrol attacked the Japanese outpost at Km. 4 along the Jolo-Bud Datu Road, killing all three and capturing their arms. The next day a big Japanese force of about 700 attacked Talipao from four directions—Mahala, Bilaan, Bandang and Maimbung—aiming to destroy suspected guerrilla concentrations. The Freedom Fighters, overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned,

avoided combat and withdrew. Angered at finding no enemy, the Japanese killed civilians whom they rightly suspected were guerrilla sympathizers, and burned the villages. The enemy must have been frustrated by the guerrillas' tactics.

During that first week of December 1944, Capt. Yasin S. Bagis with his battalion staff from the guerrilla headquarters at Tawi-Tawi arrived at Bual-Nangka on the southern side of Jolo island. He immediately assumed command of the 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment.

This was a unique battalion because its company commanders were unschooled, by Western standards, but were fearless and aggressive headmen of their communities.

Capt. Yasin S. Bagis was an Arab mestizo, well-respected by guerrillas and civilians alike. He was one of the most wanted men by the Japanese Imperial forces in Sulu because of the influence he carried, especially among the Muslims.

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Commanders of the newly organized battalion were

- 3rd Lt. Badiri Adjid-CO., "I" Co., assigned to Indanan area
  - 3rd Lt. Jumaadil Usama-CO, "K" Co., covering the Maimbung area
  - 3rd Lt. Subahani Allong, CO, "L" Co., assigned to Lapa area
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## Chapter XI **The Combat Company**

**T**he Table of Organization and Equipment (TO & E) of the Philippine Army of the Commonwealth era up to the early 1940s provided for a combat company with each infantry regiment. In reality, however, the designation was a misnomer. With its cal. .50 heavy machine guns and 81mm mortars, its role was that of a heavy weapons unit providing support for the assault units, instead of being an assault unit itself.

The Sulu area command (SAC), following the TO&E, retained the designation, but there the similarity ended. SAC's concept of its combat company was literal, and the role assigned to it was obvious—that of a highly mobile (foot) “strike anywhere” assault unit capable of delivering overwhelming small arms firepower, with its 81mm mortars in direct support.

After the Japanese lifted their three-month massive attack and encirclement of the Tawi-Tawi guerrilla forces late in July 1944, the battered and decimated remnants of the Freedom Fighters started to regroup. With the arrival by submarine of new arms and ammunition, and the infusion of fresh manpower (volunteers were no longer in short supply), among the new units organized was the Combat Co., Hq. Bn. SAC.

It was composed mainly of veteran guerrilla originals from Luuk and Jolo. New blood, mainly from Secubong island in the Tawi-Tawi group, brought it up to strength. The Secubong boys were a courageous breed who had absolute faith in their amulets and believed that these would actually ward off bullets. All were eager for a go at the enemy.

The officers of the newly created combat company were First Lieutenant Kalingalan Kaluang as its commander; Second Lieutenant Calvin Navata as its executive officer; and 3rd Lts. Aliakbar Agga, Jumaat Jumah, and Antonio Viray as platoon leaders. FSgt. Salvador Dizon was the company first sergeant.

It was said that the rank of third lieutenant was a creation of the American civil and military authorities in the early occupations of the

Philippines, born out of a sense of discrimination against the Filipinos. In their pacification campaign against continuing Filipino resistance to the occupation, the American authorities enlisted the cooperation and services of other Filipinos with the establishment of the Philippine Constabulary (PC). Originally this military organization was officered by Americans.

The American authorities realized later that it was more convenient and probably more effective if these units were officered by Filipinos themselves. That it would also save precious American lives was not a minor factor in the decision. But this situation posed a problem, that of the Filipino officers being equal in rank to American officers. At the time, this was unthinkable—or worse, that American officers would serve under Filipino officers of higher rank which, to the former, would have been a calamity.

The solution: the rank of third lieutenant for Filipinos, who would then be subordinate to the lowest-ranking American officers. In a somewhat comic irony, the American servicemen who came with the invasion forces in 1944 - 45 referred to the rank of third lieutenant as a "bastard" rank. This rank was later stricken from the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

The newly organized Combat Company, with a contingent of 60 officers and men, later to be augmented by volunteers from Tapul and Jolo, embarked from its Languyan base early in December 1944 in three kumpit, bound for the Jolo mainland to bring the war to the enemy.

The first morning out of Languyan a near tragic, yet funny, incident occurred. As the three kumpit were moving north and hugging close to the northwestern coast of Tawi-Tawi, a patrolling U.S. bomber came along and gave the small convoy a once-over. Early on the men recognized the plane as an American B-25 Mitchell bomber; they had seen pictures in magazines that came with the supplies and arms delivered by submarines. Indelibly etched in their minds were the nose-mounted 75mm cannons on the B-25s.

The men enthusiastically waved at the bomber with their hands, or extended their arms while holding on to their U.S.-made guns. They even exposed the planks painted with stars like those markings on U.S. tanks, trucks and planes. But then the bomber turned around and came straight for the kumpit in what looked like a bombing and strafing run. Thinking that the bomber pilot had mistaken them for Japanese, some

of the men jumped off the kumpit and scurried for cover offered by nearby mangrove trees.

Unknown to the men, SAC headquarters had requested AFWESPAC (Armed Forces in the Western Pacific) Headquarters in Australia to keep an eye on the troop movement (which explains the presence of those white star-painted planks.) The bomber, of course, did not fire. Some of the men, all soaking wet, had a big laugh afterwards, at their own expense.

The next day the company was forced by stormy weather to stop over at Tumbagaan island for a week. The time was put to good use by further training of the men and familiarizing them with their new weapons.

During one of these sessions an unfortunate incident happened. A guerrilla recruit unwittingly inserted a fully-loaded magazine into his cocked thompson submachine gun and accidentally pressed the trigger. The gun spewed a burst of cal. .45 slugs, hitting one guerrilla in the calf and another on the shin. Both men were disabled and did not see further action.

The last stopover was at Tapul island about ten miles south of mainland Jolo. A week later the Japanese, having been informed of the presence of guerrillas on Tapul, sent a Navy seacraft to bombard the island, but they did not land their troops. No casualties were inflicted on the guerrillas' side. In the midafternoon of 21 December men of Combat Company boarded several vintas (small dugout craft with outriggers) and made the final dash for the Jolo mainland, landing before sunset at Batu Ugis, halfway between Parang and Maimbung.

If landing at Batu Ugis did not provoke a reaction from the enemy, Combat Company had a surprise of a different sort awaiting it. Back at SAC Headquarters, Col. Suarez was not amused. He decided that the company had overstayed on Tapul island. He was fuming! "Where is Kalingalan?" he kept asking.

About midafternoon of the 23 December a courier was sent by Capt. Yasin Bagis who, a few days earlier, had arrived from SAC Headquarters in Tawi-Tawi. He had established his 3rd Battalion Headquarters at Bual Nangka three miles east of Maimbung. The courier caught up with the Combat Company at Kunalam where it was now poised to attack the Japanese forces garrisoned at Maimbung.

The courier delivered a very urgent dispatch from SAC Headquarters. Stunned, Lt. Kaluang read the order signed by Col. Suarez; he was relieved of his command and Lt. Navata was installed as the new com-

pany commander. Kaluang was shocked, and his shock turned to rage. Some men sent to scout out the enemy in Maimbung were back with the needed intelligence information.

Without bothering to relinquish his command, Lt. Kaluang yelled to his men, "Let's go!" and off they went to their first confrontation with the enemy. To the guerrillas' surprise, the intelligence information, while accurate at the time, was not up to the minute. In the interim, upon learning about guerrilla activities in the area, an advance force of some 50 Japanese soldiers moved about a mile up the road and established their positions. Combat Company was on approach march, unaware of the new enemy deployment. Before Kaluang and his men could deploy for assault the Japanese opened fire, thus revealing their position. The lead scout, Pvt. Ullak Samsuya, fell with the first volley.

With Lt. Kaluang in the lead—amid the screams and shouts, the guerrilla warriors assaulted the enemy with all guns blazing. An enemy machine gun, manned by three Japanese soldiers who kept firing, was rushed by Pvt. Basaludhim Alam, who killed the machine gunner and caused the others to flee. They were pursued and killed. Under intense firing, the Japanese force did not stand a chance. They were overrun, wiped out to a man, and it was all over in minutes. Cost: two dead guerrillas.

When he was asked to describe the first encounter of the Combat Company, one of the guerrilla officers recounted, "Imagine yourself along the seashore looking seaward. You see rocks jutting out of the water at low tide. Then a four-foot wave comes crashing over, submerging the rocks. Substitute the enemy for the rocks and the guerrillas for the four-foot wave. That would be a fitting analogy of that first encounter."

This was the first encounter, and a victory for the Combat Company. For the Japanese this was their first taste of a crushing defeat in a frontal encounter with the Combat Company, and to the Sulu warriors the myth of the Japanese as supermen in combat was completely shattered. This action was of utmost significance as it was to influence the course of the liberation of Jolo island. Succeeding encounters of this unit were no different in the display of courage and aggressiveness by its officers and men. Col. Suarez rescinded his original order for the relief of Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang as its commander.

The next day two Japanese trucks loaded with heavily armed troops from Jolo town, heading for Maimbung to reinforce the beleaguered garrison, were waylaid by patriots led by Lt. Badiri Adjid. Twenty-five

Japanese were counted dead and the second truck was completely destroyed. A second wave of Freedom Fighters rushed to the scene and found six more of the enemy still alive, and they finished them off with kris and barong.

Disturbed by guerrilla activities in the Maimbung area, Gen. Suzuki inspected his troops on Christmas Day, 1944. A truckload of Japanese troops, followed by General Suzuki's command car and over 300 Japanese soldiers marching behind, were ambushed on their way to Maimbung by Lt. Kalingalan and his men from Combat Company. Heavy casualties were inflicted, but the enemy's machine guns and mortars forced the guerrillas to withdraw. The enemy made no attempt to pursue the attackers.

The next day a Japanese force of about 500 men, in an attempt to reinforce the beleaguered fortification on Mt. Tukay, was attacked by Lt. Kalingalan and the Combat Company, and suffered 70 dead. Kalingalan and his guerrilla fighters were forced to disengage because of intense enemy machine gun and mortar fire. However, another guerrilla group from "I" Co., led by Lt. Badiri, reestablished contact with the enemy, ambushing it as it pressed on its march toward Mt. Tukay. Lt. Badiri and his men disengaged after further decimating this large enemy column.

The Maimbung-Parang sectors in the southwestern part of Jolo island had now become a frequent arena for ambushes and direct encounters between Japanese forces and Sulu warriors. Here the Bushido spirit of the enemy met its match in the ferocity and aggressiveness of the Sulu Freedom Fighters. These warriors were bringing the fight to the enemy, not only through ambushes, but often in open warfare, despite the enemy's superiority in arms and number.

With the Japanese forces at Maimbung badly battered, the large enemy force in the fortified garrison at Mt. Tukay, overlooking the town of Parang at the southwestern end of Jolo island, feared the same fate and withdrew on 30 December 1944. Upon learning of the enemy's movement, Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang sent Lt. Calvin Navata and a unit of Combat Company in pursuit. Navata's unit, reinforced by elements of "I" Co. led by Sgt. Sarri Sanaani, intercepted the retreating enemy column at Bunot, Indanan along the road to Jolo town.

Navata and his men ambushed the retreating enemy force, then battled them from 10:00 a.m. to near midnight, when the Japanese made a detour in an attempt to link up with a relief column sent from Jolo



town. These reinforcements were, however, waylaid by elements from "I" Co. led by Cpl. Jose Degala, who lost his life in the fight. In this encounter it was estimated that over 100 Japanese troops were killed and many more wounded. The Japanese were reported to have piled dead bodies of those whom they could retrieve in three trucks. Several trucks were also destroyed. The patriots suffered only eight killed and over two dozen wounded.

Although the element of surprise from concealed positions gave the guerrillas a distinct advantage in these close quarters battles, it was their aggressiveness and ferocity that tipped the scales in their favor against the disciplined enemy. Again, in their three-century battle against Spain, when her power was at its peak, the Moro warriors were said to fight for the love of combat. War was a serious business to Spain, but to the Moros it was an enjoyable game. This scenario was again repeated in the battle for the liberation of Jolo island from the Japanese.

While the Bunot encounter was fought, another strong guerrilla unit ambushed a large enemy force in Timbangan, again inflicting heavy Japanese casualties. The enemy refused to disengage and the fighting continued for almost 10 hours. Other guerrilla units operating close by rushed to the aid of their comrades.

Hand-to-hand combat followed. When they ran out of ammunition, the Tausug warriors resorted to the use of the fearsome kris and barong. In close combat they were hard to stop. The guerrillas lost over two dozen fighters. The Japanese force lost more. Over 100 dead Japanese were counted. Many Japanese arms, supplies and accessories were captured, and two trucks were destroyed.

After the incessant guerrilla attacks and the fierce encounters that took place during the last few days in December, the Japanese high command in Jolo ordered the withdrawal of most of their out-of-the-way garrisons to their main defense positions around Jolo town.

Early in January 1945 Capt. Kaluang took Combat Company to Luuk on the northeastern part of Jolo island to attack the Japanese garrison at Camp Andres. The enemy must have expected Kaluang's attack because the Camp Andres garrison was reinforced by another Japanese unit deployed at Tandu farther to the east.

Combat Company's earlier success had by now gained notoriety with the Japanese forces, and its impending attack must have struck terror among the enemy. Annihilation was usually the Combat Company's

goal, especially during ambushes. That night, before the expected guerrilla assault on Camp Andres, the large enemy force withdrew towards Seit, at the northern waist of Jolo island. They marched the whole night and reached their destination the following day.

On 9 January 1945 a Japanese patrol of 11 men on their way to Kagay from Jolo town was wiped out by a guerrilla patrol led by Lt. Datu Patarasa. Among those killed was an officer. Sabers, rifles, bayonets and helmets were captured. One of Patarasa's men was wounded. Whether the enemy patrol was small or large, the guerrilla forces went after them.

Hardly had the large retreating enemy force from Camp Andres settled in their new location at Seit when elements of "B" Co., under Lt. Nain Usman, attacked them at the poblacion on 9 January inflicting heavy casualties. Several of Lt. Nain's fighters were wounded; one was killed.

### **Lt. Fabian Sindayen**

On 17 January with the guerrilla offensive on Jolo island raging fiercely, Lt. Fabian Sindayen, hero of the Manukmangka battle in Tawi-Tawi, was dispatched from headquarters to assume command of 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment. Two weeks earlier Sindayen displayed exceptional courage when he and his men repulsed a strong enemy force of over 700 men that attacked Manukmangka island.

Lt. Sindayen, a young, aggressive and diligent officer, was a "follow me" type commander. He carried in his spine 50-cal. machine gun bullet fragments from a Japanese zero fighter plane. His men said that these fragments had become his amulet. He was fearless, and everyone in his command knew it. They were proud to have him as a leader.

Except for Lt. Abirin, all the officers were Tapihan guerrillas. Eager to get into the act, Lt. Sindayen immediately established his command post at Buntod located at the Jolo island mid-section.

The day after he took command of the 1st battalion, Capt. Sindayen's troops from "A" Co. jumped a Japanese patrol sent out of their entrenched position at Kan Kaukub Hill at the Talipao-Panamao boundary. The en-

The officers under his new command were

- 3rd Lt. Juan Allen-CO, "A" Co., covering Patikul
- 3rd Lt. Jamalul Abirin-Exec. Officer, "A" Co., son of Sultan Jainal Abirin of Sulu
- 3rd Lt. Nain Usman-CO, "B" Co., covering Tabu Manuk area
- 3rd Lt. Saituan Tan-CO, "D" Co., assigned to Pangutaran Island
- 3rd Lt. Ahmad Bagis-Exec. Officer, "D" Co.

emy patrol of 16 men was wiped out. Subsequently the Japanese forces abandoned their entrenched position and withdrew to join their main forces in Jolo town.

In the midafternoon of the same day Sindayen's men encountered an enemy patrol at Bauno Timbangan. In the encounter the enemy suffered heavy casualties, causing them to disengage and flee towards Jolo town.

In mid-January 1945, the Sulu warriors had captured Maimbung from the enemy, but four days later a Japanese force of over 300 men attacked the town with the aim to recapture it. Using 75mm howitzers and mortars from entrenched positions at Mt. Matatal a mile and a half to the northwest, the enemy rained shells on guerrilla positions around Maimbung and vicinity.

Commanding the guerrilla forces in Maimbung was Capt. Ismael Ratag, who had been sent from headquarters in Tawi-Tawi to take over command of 3rd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment. Ratag was a dashing but cool Tapikan Guerrilla officer who had the knack of extracting the best from his officers and men. In the encounter that ensued, the officers and men of "K" and "L" companies fought courageously and blunted the enemy's advance, even if they were heavily outnumbered and outgunned.

Reinforcement arrived from "I" Co. under Lts. Badiri and Payani who attacked the enemy from the rear. This strategy forced the Japanese troops to retreat, leaving their dead behind. Bodies counted were 58, but estimates had it that the enemy suffered no less than 100 casualties.

In this encounter the enemy's frontal assault was supported by mortars and howitzers from Matatal hill. It was in this fight where the heroic statement attributed to Lt. Jumaadil Usama, a blackteeth commander, originated: "Wai mag dit dit, das das hadja!" The English translation: "There must be no retreat; rush, rush only!" Usama was a fighter and leader with incredible courage.

The battle started at 0530H and ended at 1225H. In this encounter at close quarters the enemy's attack was repulsed. The enemy retreated towards Matatal hill. The Sulu warriors suffered eight casualties and 13 wounded.

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The roster of the guerrilla commanders at the defense line in the Battle of Maimbung included

- Capt. Ismael Ratag, Commanding Officer
  - Lt. Jumaadil Usama, Center Front
  - Lt. Maruji Jumaadil, Reserve
  - Lt. Arastam Maang, Right Flank
  - Lt. Jamalul Mandul, Right Center
  - Lt. Jikiri Hunjali, Left Flank
-

**Pvt. Eduardo Otayco**

Among those killed in the battle of Maimbung was Pvt. Eduardo Otayco. Eddie Otayco was my very close friend. His mother was Muslim and his father was a Christian. He was two years older than I and was a next-door neighbor. In 1938, when I was a freshman in high school, he was a junior. We played basketball together sometimes in his backyard, or in the backyard of Mr. Rabulan, where Mulo and I were boarding.

The houses in the neighborhood were connected to a straight, long, four-foot wide wooden bridge. It was a small, quiet community, but one night all the dogs in the neighborhood started barking in unison, their heads directed upward, with a peculiar whining sound. We were advised that when this happens there is usually a mad dog in the vicinity.

The peace of the neighborhood was again disturbed by the canines' whining bark on the following night. On the third night the barking became intense at the other end of the bridge. Our eyes focused in that direction, we saw the rabid dog, its tail between its hind legs, gnashing its teeth at any dog that would approach. Dogs seemed to know the consequences should they attack the rabid animal. A bite from a rabid dog causes rabies, which is usually fatal unless treated with many antirabies injections.

Eddie, who saw what was happening, rushed to get his father's barong (a Muslim razor-sharp bladed weapon), positioned himself along the bridge and waited. Tensely we watched the confrontation.

When the rabid animal saw that it was being challenged, it rushed towards the lone figure on the bridge holding his sharp-bladed weapon ready. The dog lunged at him with teeth bared and mouth opened. Eddie stepped back. The animal missed his hand, and instead was practically decapitated by the sweeping force of the razor-sharp blade.

Eddie became an instant hero to all the boys in the neighborhood. His father, however, berated him for the foolish act.

During the Japanese counterattack in Maimbung, seeing his fellow guerrilla fighters being felled by enemy bullets from a superior enemy force, Eddie did the very same thing he had done with the mad dog. He rushed at the enemy, his thompson submachine gun blazing. This time, however, his luck ran out. Although his comrades successfully repulsed the counterattack, Pvt. Otayco lost his life in the battle.

On 27 January 1945 Pfc. Moro Pala and four of his men, on rest and recreation and seeking excitement, reconnoitered the airfield area at the outskirts of Jolo town and killed four Japanese guards. Early on 1 February 1945, Lt. Badiri Adjid and his troops from "I" Co., supported by forces of Lt. Hatib Subahani Allong of "K" Co. engaged an enemy force of over 100 men at Timbangan. The guerrillas met the enemy head on. After a pitched battle, the enemy retreated, leaving their dead behind. Arms and equipment captured included rifles, sabers, sidearms, helmets and grenades.

The enemy was now given no rest. The following day at 0100H Lt. Hatib Subabani and his men from Cotta Kayawan ambushed a platoon-sized enemy patrol at Km. 6 along the Jolo-Taglibi Road. The enemy disengaged with their wounded, but left 10 of their dead behind. We captured rifles, hand grenades, bayonets and helmets. Our men suffered no casualties.

Bringing the fight to the enemy, Lt. Hatib Subahani and his troops from "L" Co., 3rd Battalion, attacked the Japanese garrison on Mt. Pata, Pata island, south of Jolo island on 12 February 1945. The garrison's 11 Japanese defenders were annihilated. Among the booty captured were rifles, ammunition, grenades and helmets. On the same day, other elements of "L" Co. were sent to destroy the enemy force at Cotta Kayawan at the other side of the island, and they killed all 14 of the remaining enemy soldiers in the cotta. Annihilation had become the order of the day, and this must have had a chilling effect even on the disciplined Japanese forces.

On the same day on Jolo island, Lt. Jumaat Jumah, now commanding "I" Co., 3rd Battalion, sent 2 of his men, Pvts. Padam Pakam and Asjid Pangambayan, to attack the enemy outpost at Bato-Puti, where they killed all 3 Japanese guards. Also on the same day, Lt. Jumah sent a squad of his men, headed by Pfc. Sahibul, to destroy the main enemy post at Bato-Puto, Jolo and they killed all 12 of the Japanese defenders without any casualty on their side.

On 15 February 1945 1st Lt. Calvin Navata, now in command of Combat Company, attacked the Japanese supply base on Pata island. The base was manned by the Japanese puppet mayor Abbas, his police force and other armed followers. The base was overrun in a night assault and the warehouse full of supplies was captured.

An interesting episode in the attack on Pata island was a chance encounter in a one-on-one duel on the beach under a bright, full moon between Lt. Navata and the puppet mayor. It was a one-on-one duel: a Colt .45 double action versus a Springfield 03. Each fired a shot at 20 feet. The mayor bit the sand. The .45 bullet tore dead center through his chest and pierced his traitorous heart. The young lieutenant emerged unscathed.

On the night of 18 February the enemy force quietly slipped out of its entrenched position on Pata island. From a secluded beach they embarked in three motor launches sent to fetch them. Now the Japanese strategy became clear. Rather than holding out in garrisons and outposts to be decimated by aggressive guerrilla assaults, they abandoned their positions and consolidated their force in their main fortified locations in Jolo town, Bud Daho, and Tumantangis mountain.

On 20 February 1945 two guerrilla snipers from "I" Co. sneaked close to the Japanese defense line at Bud Pula and killed two, wounding two others. The snipers returned to their camp undetected. On the same day at 1200H a patrol led by Pfc. Sayadi Umi and Pvt. Amandul reconnoitered the enemy garrison at Timbangan. The Japanese troops were busy digging communication trenches and pillboxes. The guerrillas opened up with their carbines, felling two immediately. A Japanese machine gunner on the roof of the late Perry Maclean's house tried to cover the retreat of his comrades, but a well-aimed burst from the TSMG of Pvt. Asmadul sent him rolling down the roof. The assistant machine gunner tried to take over and man the machine gun, but met the same fate. The patriots withdrew without sustaining casualties.

The following day another patrol from "I" Co. returned to Timbangan and saw Japanese soldiers demolishing a civilian house, and killed five of them. The rest fled. Captured were several arms with ammunition.

Pata island was not yet completely liberated because on 20 February 1st Sgt. Alfred Pber of "L" Co., 3rd Battalion encountered a large enemy patrol and engaged it, killing 13 of the enemy including its commander. In the afternoon of the same day Faber and his troops ambushed another enemy patrol, killing 6 more. The guerrillas suffered no casualties.

Guerrillas in small units were seeking enemy positions to attack. On 23 February a squad of Freedom Fighters from "I" Co. attacked an enemy force while they were fixing their bamboo water pipe at Tangoh Porat, Jolo. Three were felled and four others wounded. As the pipe

under repair was between two enemy posts, they became confused and continued firing on each other even after the guerrilla patrol had left the scene.

On 24 February Lt. Kalingalan Kaluang, now in command of 3rd Battalion, sent a squad of his men in two vintas to intercept a Japanese launch near Pata island. When the launch was within range the guerrilla patrols simultaneously fired. The heavily armed launch responded with machine gun fire, but with the intensity of cross firing from several BARs, the enemy launch had to withdraw and headed for Jolo town.

On the same day 30 men of "L" Co., 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, again assaulted the Japanese garrison on Pata island. Caught by surprise, seven defenders were instantly killed and the rest fled to Dandulit village; they were overtaken by pursuing guerrilla fighters and annihilated. This day marked the complete liberation of Pata island from the hands of the enemy.

On 27 February 1945, Capt. Fabian Sindayen was ordered to destroy the Japanese stronghold at Danag, defended by about 200 enemy troops armed with machine guns, one 75mm howitzer and mortars. Sindayen and his men stormed the enemy position. In this pitched battle the Sulu warriors relentlessly sustained their assault, engaging the enemy at point blank range and in hand-to-hand combat. Again, with their kris and barong slashing, Sindayen and his men finally overran the enemy stronghold, capturing the 75mm howitzer, mortars, grenades and sacks of rice which the enemy left as they beat a hasty retreat. The enemy failed to retrieve their dead. The following day, with three truckloads of reinforcements, the enemy counterattacked, but Sindayen and his men were ready. The enemy withdrew to Jolo town and Danag remained in guerrilla hands.

From 20 February through 2 March 1945. After aggressive and relentless attacks by guerrilla warriors on enemy positions all over Jolo island, only Matatal Hill remained as the Japanese stronghold outside of their inner perimeter around Jolo town. Matatal Hill, some three kilometers outside Maimbung town, was of strategic importance and was strongly defended. It controlled the road into town and overlooked the surrounding areas of Maimbung. It limited guerrilla activities in Maimbung which was now controlled by the Sulu warriors.

Under the overall command of Lt. Kalingalam Kaluang, guerrilla forces decided to destroy this fortified enemy position. Elements of "K"

Co. under Lt. Maximino Molijon attacked Matatal Hill from the south, while Combat Company under Lt. Calvin Navata made a frontal assault. Both companies made little progress against concentrated fire from the enemy's vantage positions.

In the early afternoon, taking advantage of a driving rain, the Japanese forces counterattacked. "K" Co. bore the brunt of the enemy's assault. Casualties were heavy. Among the wounded were two of my former high school classmates, Cpl. Jailani Waraji and Pfc. Pacifico Yanga. The enemy's counterattack was repulsed, with the enemy sustaining heavy casualties. It was a stalemate.

Combat Company had an ace in the hole: its 81mm mortars. Personally manned by Lt. Navata, these mortars could lob shells with deadly accuracy on entrenched enemy positions on the hill. Ammunition dumps, bunkers, and troop concentrations were all hit. But shelling could not be sustained because of a limited supply of mortar shells. Thus the guerrilla commanders decided to lay a siege, and this strategy worked.

Under cover of darkness on the night of 1 March the large enemy force abandoned their entrenched position and retreated to Jolo town 13 kilometers away. Upon discovering the enemy's move, guerrilla troops gave quick pursuit, overtaking them midway between Matatal Hill and Jolo town. Heavy fighting ensued.

As if attracted to "game," other guerrilla units joined the fray. Although outnumbered and outgunned, the guerrilla forces tenaciously kept up the fight, with other guerrilla forces blocking the enemy's retreat. A running battle continued through most of the morning, with the patriots decimating the retreating enemy forces until the latter reached their fortified haven outside Jolo town.

Many of the enemy's dead littered the Maimbung-Jolo town road. Their arms, including machine guns, mortars, and rifles were abandoned.

This battle earned for Lt. Navata his first of two Bronze Star medals from Maj. Gen. Jens Doe, Commanding General 41st Inf. (Sunset) Division (U.S. Army).

After this long and bloody encounter the Japanese high command on Jolo island decided to confine their forces to a perimeter of fortified positions along the string of hills three to five kilometers outside of Jolo town. The rest of Jolo island was liberated. This was the military situation when American forces landed at Kaunayan Beach in the Patikul area on 9 April 1945.



## Chapter XII **The Japanese on the Verge of Defeat**

### **American Forces' Landing on Jolo Island**

On 9 April 1945 the 163rd Regimental Combat Team, 41st Infantry (Sunset) Division, 8th U.S. Army, commanded by Col. Monroney, landed at Kaunayan Beach. Not a shot was fired. Instead they were welcomed by guerrilla forces.

Col. Alejandro Suarez arrived from his Tawi-Tawi headquarters to take command of his guerrilla forces. The Sulu warriors were trucked to a staging area near Danag, astride the chain of hills and mountains forming the spine of Jolo island. They waited for the order to assault Japanese positions in coordination with the advance American forces. Backed by an artillery barrage from the U.S. forces, and strafing and bombing runs from corsairs of the U.S. Marines air group from Zamboanga, the combined American and guerrilla forces lost no time in methodically destroying most of the enemy's fortified positions in the following days.

Meanwhile, on 10 April 1945 "D" Co., 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment under Lt. Ahmad Bagis was brought on three U.S. Navy landing craft from Pangutaran island for deployment with other guerrilla forces now operating in the Danag and Bud Daho areas. But "H" Co., 3rd Battalion was soon detached from the main guerrilla force and assigned to mop up enemy pockets of resistance on the south side of Jolo island. "D" Co., now under the command of Lt. Bagis, was assigned to the Ipil-Bualnangka area, also for mopping up.

The "D" Co. was unique in that most of the troops were Filipino-Chinese mestizos who escaped from the Japanese occupation of Jolo town and Cagayan de Sulu to Pangutaran island 20 miles northwest of Jolo island. Its first commanding officer (CO) was 3rd Lt. Saituan Tan, also a Chinese mestizo. Its executive officer was Lt. Ahmad Bagis. Newly commissioned after his participation in several encounters against enemy forces in Jolo, Bagis took over command of "D" Co. after it was deployed to Jolo island.

On 11 April after a heavy artillery barrage laid down by American Army forces and air strikes by U.S. Marine Dive Bombers, Capt. Fabian Sindayen, with elements of his 1st Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment—abreast with troops of Capt. Calvin Navata's Combat Company—attacked the fortified enemy position near Danag.

Stunned and shocked by the bombing and shelling of supporting American units, the enemy positions were overrun by Sindayen and Navata. These two young, aggressive, fearless officers led their men against larger enemy forces and engaged them in close combat. Here again the razor sharp kris and barong played a big role in hand-to-hand combat. The guerrillas captured large quantities of arms, ammunition and supplies.

On 12 April Col. Suarez ordered Combat Company from Danag to neutralize entrenched enemy positions holding the American forces from advancing up the road from Jolo town which the latter had captured earlier. At Pandang, two kilometers down the road from Danag, Combat Company unexpectedly ran into stiff opposition and intense firing from both sides of heavily fortified Japanese positions. These positions had previously been unreported and were the enemy's main line of resistance. It was manned by a marine battalion backed by three twin dual-purpose 25mm automatic firing guns and several machine guns. The guerrilla attack was repulsed and casualties were heavy.

"I" Co. troops under 2nd Lt. Jumaat Jumah and 2nd Lt. Badiri Adjid took up the assault the next day and were also repulsed after sustaining more casualties.

Up through 17 April only little advance was made. Then on the 18th Capt. Navata and his Combat Company, supported by Lt. Viray with elements of "K" Co., mounted another assault using bazookas. These men were of incredible courage. They smashed through enemy lines, fought them at close range, and engaged them in hand-to-hand combat, causing the enemy to flee while leaving scores of their dead behind. Also captured were the three twin dual-purpose 25mm guns, machine guns, and other supplies. Guerrilla casualties were seven men wounded. The next day Combat and "K" Cos. linked up with the American forces bombing up the road. The Americans also broke through strong enemy positions that held their advance farther down the road.

This spectacular action earned Capt. Navata his second Bronze Star medal.

On 18 April 70 men of "L" Co., 3rd Battalion under Lt. Subahani Allong mopped up Pianhan Hill near Parang on Tumantangis mountain. Lt. Allong was reinforced by an additional platoon under Lt. Paber.

Combat Company was finally moved to Indanan on 21 April 1945 for a well-deserved rest, but not for long. Two days later it was recalled to destroy a strong enemy position built around a 75mm mountain gun at Bato-Puti on the eastern slope of Tumantangis mountain. In a fierce encounter Combat Company captured the position, including the 75mm gun, but the enemy counterattacked and recovered the big gun. The Combat Company sustained several casualties and had to withdraw.

That night the Japanese troops used the big 75mm gun to shell Jolo town, sending several American and civilian casualties to the U.S. Army Field Hospital. The following morning a combined American-guerrilla attack rampaged through the enemy position, dislodged the defenders, and recaptured the big gun for good.

This gun now adorns the front of the Philippine Police headquarters at Camp Asturias in Jolo town.

On 25 April Lt. Agustin Datiles, and elements of "A" and "D" Cos., were ordered to ferret out a large enemy force that had withdrawn to a forested area on the south side of Jolo island. Lt. Datiles immediately established his command post at Jingan in the center of his operational area. Datiles, a professional soldier of the old school and a Tapikan Guerrilla, dislodged the entrenched enemy, killing many and causing the rest to withdraw towards their main line in Mt. Tumantangis.

On the same day at 0800H Lt. Datu Amilhussin of "I" Co. and his men ambushed an enemy patrol between Mangalis and Matanda. After a brief fight the enemy fled, leaving behind nine of their dead comrades with their weapons.

The following day at 1500H a patrol led by Lt. Paber encountered 20 enemy troops moving in the opposite direction near Tubig Talibang. In the encounter 12 of the enemy were killed, causing the rest to disengage and flee.

On 29 April 1945 Combat Company was ordered to destroy the enemy stronghold at Tanduh Lahi on the northern coast, but strong enemy defenders repulsed the attack; several guerrillas were killed. Resuming the attack the following day, the enemy position defended by over 50 men was overrun. The retreating troops were pursued, and with support from other units blocking their retreat, the enemy force was annihilated.

This action by Combat Company cleared the northern part of Jolo island of Japanese troops.

A guerrilla patrol under Lt. Jumaat Jumah, temporarily attached to a unit of the 3rd Battalion, 163rd Regimental Combat Team, U.S. Army under the command of Lt. Miller, was sent to recover the body of Pvt. Abdulsali Awali. On 19 May 1945 Jumaat and his men were ambushed, losing Pfc. Sahibil Sariol to sniper fire, while several others were wounded. The guerrillas had to withdraw. An American patrol in the vicinity joined the guerrillas, but after a brisk engagement also had to withdraw after losing some men. At 1630H Lt. Jumaat and his men resumed the assault by attacking from the rear, which the enemy did not expect. The enemy position was overrun.

Not only did Jumaat succeed in recovering the body of Pvt. Awali, but his men practically annihilated the enemy troops in the forested area. In the encounter Jumah's men used kris and barong in hand-to-hand combat to dislodge the remaining enemy force.

In the fight against the Spanish conquistadors centuries before, the Sulu warriors were described as "horrible in attack" and they employed as weapons the kris, that wavy edged sword with a double cutting edge. It was one of the most terrible offensive weapons. In the battle for the Jolo's liberation the Sulu warriors were still using the kris effectively.

### **Death of a Japanese General**

In May 1945, Lt. Badiri, CO of "I Co., sent some men under his brother, Cpl. Isnaji Adjid to Jolo town on a mission. Returning the next day to his unit, Cpl. Adjid spotted an enemy column crossing the road near the Bud Datu area. Adjid and his men immediately engaged the Japanese force, and in this chance encounter many of the enemy were killed. The guerrillas suffered several casualties in dead and wounded. Cpl. Adjid sustained a knee wound.

Unknown to Cpl. Adjid, among the Japanese killed was the commander of the Japanese forces in Jolo, Maj. Gen. Teshono Suzuki. Gen. Suzuki was commander of the 55th Independent Mixed Brigade on Jolo island, which was under the 35th Army.

Cpl. Adjid, while being taken to the field hospital, happened to be interviewed by Capt. Calvin Navata, commander of Combat Company, who was visiting some of his wounded men. Neither he nor Adjid was

aware of Gen. Suzuki's death. Years later, during Navata's sessions with Shinichi Toda, the latter related the circumstance of the death of the general, and Navata realized that Toda's account and that of Adjid's encounter matched perfectly. That was the only encounter between a guerrilla unit and Japanese forces attempting to cross the road in the Bud Datu area then.

Mopping-up operations continued, and hand-to-hand combat became a common occurrence while guerrillas were dislodging enemy troops from their foxholes, caves, and fortified positions. The enemy refused to surrender to guerrilla forces. The guerrillas, particularly the Tausug warriors, armed themselves with kris and the barong. The hacking wounds these weapons caused terrified the Japanese troops, and they may have had a traumatic effect on the enemy as they fought to the bitter end.

### **Death by Hara-kiri**

In the mopping-up operation by guerrilla units of the 3rd Battalion in Mt. Tumantangis where Japanese forces decided to make their final stand, "L" Co. stumbled upon a series of bunkers on the eastern slope. As the men cautiously approached, they started to wonder why no firing was coming from the enemy's defense position. Their apprehension was soon relieved as they entered the Japanese defense perimeter.

Thirty five of the defenders were all dead by their own hands. What could have taken place could only be deduced from the ghastly scene.

The Japanese defenders had survived an Army artillery barrage and bombing and strafing runs by Corsair planes. Ground troops were sure to follow. They must have known that they would not stand a chance, especially against guerrilla fighters bent on vengeance. They could not surrender to the Sulu warriors who had been victims of their atrocities in the past.

As suggested by their uniformly slit throats, they must have willingly submitted to their fate, as some of their comrades had chosen to do the gruesome job butchered them, one after the other. Then, in turn, the butchers must have butchered each other, with the last survivor taking his own life with a sword.

The newly dried blood on the scene, some still unclotted, indicated that they decided to end it all that morning. Emaciated, dehydrated, literally skin and bones, they all would have succumbed to starvation in

no time. They were doomed and for them hara-kiri was the most honorable thing to do.

### Reorganization of the Sulu Area Command

On 30 June 1945 the Sulu Area Command was deactivated. Col. Alejandro Suarez received orders from higher command to make preparations for the activation of some of the Sulu Area Command forces into the 61st Infantry Regiment, Philippine Army on 18 July 1945. Other members were absorbed by the newly organized Military Police Command.

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The following is a roster of officers of the Sulu area command before its deactivation:

NAME AND RANK	ASSIGNMENT	STATION
<b>Lieutenant Colonel</b>		
1. Suarez, Alejandro	CO, Sulu Area Command	In the Field
<b>Majors</b>		
1. Frayna, Luis	CO, 1st Bn., 1st Sulu Inf. Regt. & Exec. Officer SAC	Bato-Bato
2. Coronel, Dominador	Judge Advocate, SAC	Bato-Bato
<b>Captains</b>		
1. Bagis, Yasin S.	Propagandist, SAC	Jolo Island
2. Imao, Abdulrahim	Inspector, Jolo Troops	Jolo Island
3. Ratag, Ismael H.	CO, 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Sinumul
4. Kaluang, Kalingalan	CO, 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
5. Lontoc, Federico M.	Regtl. Surgeon, SAC	Jolo
6. Guligado, Engracio	Finance Officer, SAC	Bato-Bato
7. Imao, Abdulhalim	Exec. O. & Adjutant, 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
8. Laxamana, Federico	CO, Medical Co. Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
9. Maut, Saberalam	Inspector, SAC	In the field

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10. Navata, Calvin	CO, Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
11. Sindayen, Fabian	CO, 1st Bn., 2nd Inf Regt.	Jolo
12. Trespeces, Alejandro	S-3, SAC CO,	Bato-Bato
13. Usman, Sabtal	CO, Hq. Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
14. Velasquez, Maximiniano	Regtl. Adjutant	Jolo

**First Lieutenants**

1. Surian, Taib	Exec. O. & Adjutant, 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Siasi
2. Kiram, Ismael	Bn. S-4, 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
3. Abubakar, Hadji Jacaria	Hq. & Hq. Ser. Co.	Bato-Bato
4. Simeon, Vicente L.	Hq. & Hq. Ser. Co.	Jolo
5. Albarracin, Teodoro	S-4, SAC	Bato-Bato
6. Bernardino, Fausto	CO, MB, Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
7. Datiles, Agustin	Bn. S-3, 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Siasi
8. Lukman, Abdulhamid	CO, Co. "A", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
9. Malijon, Maximino	Exec. O. & Adj., 3rd Bn., 3rd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
10. Sinoro, Fortunato	MS & Bn. S-4, 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
11. Sapal, Islani	S-2, SAC	Jolo
12. Cuevas, Antonio	Regtl. DS	Jolo

**Second Lieutenants**

1. Itum, Pajawa	CO, 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
2. Adjid, Badiri	CO, Co. "I", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
3. Flores, Roque	CO, Co. "B", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
4. Usama, Jumaadil	CO, Co. "K", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Maimbung

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5. Abdul, Asmad	CO, Co. "G", 2nd Bn, 2nd Inf. Regt.	Sibutu
6. Bahjin, Adjidin	S-3, 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
7. Datiles, Bonifacio	Co. "B", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
8. Estino, Abtahi	CO, Co. "E", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
9. Jumah, Jumaat	CO, Co. "I", 3rd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
10. Sapal, Julhari	Exec. O. & Adj., 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
11. Tambehik, Jalaide	Exec. O. & Adj., 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
12. Usman, Paraji	CO, 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
13. Utu Anni, Indanan	CO, Co. "H", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
14. Viray, Antonio	CO, Co. "K", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Maimbung
15. Ansula, Sempick	Bn. S-3, 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
16. Badal, Lasdin	Co. "A", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
17. Ali, Hadhi Mohammad	CO, Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Sapa
18. Hassim, Hadji Hussin	CO, Co. "F", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	South Ubian
19. Agga, Aliakbar	Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
20. Jamalul, Mandul	CO, MB, Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
21. Lepai, Panglima	CO, Co. "E", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Latuan
22. Allen, Juan	CO, Co. "A", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
23. Galarosa, Simon	Co. "H", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
24. Ladja Indanan	CO, Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
25. Jumaadil, Maruji	Exec. O., Co. "K", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Maimbung
26. Lee, Gua	CO, Co. "D", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
27. Patarasa, Datu	Co. "I", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo

*Continued*



28. Subahani, Hatib	CO, Co. "L", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
29. Abirin, Jamalul	Exec. O., Co. "A", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
30. Aglipay, Marcelo	Adj., Ser. Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
31. Aguaras, Tomas	Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
32. Akmad, Hadji	CO, Co. "M", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
33. Alasa, Kiamting	Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Banaran
34. Amilussin, Datu	Co. "I", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
35. Aming, Maharaja	CO, Co. "C", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Tapul
36. Assang, Ahang	Co. "H", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Languyan
37. Baldos, Canuto	Co. "B", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
38. Balisi, Bernardo	Co. "B", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
39. Basa, Jawali	CO, Co. "C", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
40. Cababa, Leonardo	Exec. O., Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Sibutu
41. Colinares, Eleno	Co. "E", 2nd Bn, 2nd Inf. Regt.	Latuan
42. Diaz, Lazaro	Asst. S-4, SAC	Bongao
43. Espaldon, Ernesto	CO, Co. "H", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Bongao
44. Espaldon, Romulo	Bn. S-2, 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
45. Frayna, Diongsoy	Co. "A", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
46. Gayong, Imam	Exec. O., Co. "E", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Latuan
47. Haas, Fausto	Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
48. Kalbit, Yusop	Exec. O., Co. "F", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
49. Nery, Andres	Co. "C", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
50. Paber, Alfredo	Co. "L", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Lapa
51. Pink Tan, Vincent	Co. "D", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Pangutaran

*Continued*

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52. Que, Simon	Exec. O., Co. "F", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
53. Regellana, Felix	Bn. S-4, 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
54. Regino, Antonio	Radio Operator, Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bato-Bato
55. Salahuddin, Sabtal	Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
56. Saldin, Alibasa	Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Sibutu
57. Strattan, Washington	Exec. O., Co. "D", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
58. Tan, Saituan	CO, Co. "D", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Pangutaran
59. Ungas, Datu	Exec. O., Co. "A", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
60. Wadiad, Jumah	Co. "B", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
61. Ylanan, Eluterio	Co. "D", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
62. Hamjali, Jikiri	Bn. S-2, 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
63. Jailani, Payani	Co. "I", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
64. Usman, Nain	CO, Co. "B", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Luuk
65. Ali, Sencio	Co. "C", 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Sapa
66. Sali, Abduasi	Bn. S-3, 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
67. Mangubat, Petronilo	Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
68. Usman, Asgali	Exec. O., Co. "C", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Jolo
69. Usman, Jamasali	Exec. O., Co. "C", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
70. Tungal, Abdua	Bn. S-2, 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Simunul
71. Bagis, Ahmad	Exec. O., Co. "D", 1st Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Pangutaran
72. Maang, Arastam	Co. "H", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Parang	Parang
73. Nuega, Gaudencio	Bn. S-2, 2nd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
74. Sakiral, Atiula	Co. "A", 3rd Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Parang

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75. Medina, Hilarion	Radio Operator	Cagayan deSulu
76. Mendez, Ignacio	Cagayan de Sulu Detachment	Cagayan de Sulu
77. Agga, Yahiya	Combat Co., Hq. Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Jolo
78. Cedilio, Valentin	CO, MG Co., end Inf. Regt.	Jolo
79. Itum, Mahanton	Co. "C", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Siasi
80. Lee, Sima	Co. "D", 1st Bn., 1st Inf. Regt.	Bongao
81. Oliveros, Tomas	Asst. Finance O., SAC	Jolo
82. Quana, Tianso	Hq. & Hq. & Serv. Co., Hg. Bn.	Jolo
83. Reyes, Suraide	MB, 2nd Inf. Regt.	Bongao
84. Sapal, Ambutong	Co. "G", 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf. Regt.	Sibutu
85. Rotag, Hussein	Asst. S-2, SAC	Bato-Bato

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The roster is alphabetically arranged by rank and according to seniority. Seniority in this list is governed by the date of appointment or date of last promotion, as the case may be. This roster of officers before deactivation came from the partial report of Capt. Velasquez on the history of the Sulu Area Command submitted on 31 December, of which I have a copy.

### **SAC'S Incorporation into the 61st Infantry Regiment**

The Philippine Army headquarters in Manila organized a new infantry regiment in southern Philippines and assigned Colonel Alejandro Suarez as its commanding officer with headquarters in Pasonanca, Zamboanga City. Most of the guerrilla units from the Sulu Area Command, Zamboanga, and Misamis were incorporated into the 61st Infantry Regiment. Officers from the Sulu Area Command who were assigned to Col. Suarez's regimental staff were:

Capt. Maximiniano Velasquez, Regimental S-3  
2nd Lt. Ernesto M. Espaldon, Asst. Adjutant and Liaison Officer

The 3rd Battalion of the 61st Infantry Regiment was made up mostly of officers and men of the Sulu Area Command and stationed in Jolo, Sulu.

From 1 July to 30 September 1945, the 3rd Battalion, Philippine Army, in coordination with some U.S. Army units, continued to conduct mopping-up operations on Jolo island, particularly in the Mt. Tumantangis area where most of the surviving Japanese soldiers were holed up in caves and bunkers.

In the final phase of the Sulu campaign, particularly on Jolo island, the encounters between Japanese troops and the guerrilla warriors were fierce and brutal. Here the Bushido courage met its match in the aggressiveness and ferocity of the Sulu guerrillas. The enemy on Jolo island, cut off and without chances of reinforcements—yet refusing to surrender to the guerrillas—were left to be wiped out.

During this final phase of the guerrilla war, I was reassigned to the Sulu Area Command headquarters in Jolo to work again with Capt. Velasquez, the SAC adjutant, and was monitoring the mopping-up operations. There was little glory in the task of mopping up, but it had to be done. There were still pockets of enemy troops entrenched in caves, in the jungle, and in the hillsides of Mt. Tumantangis.

Guerrilla patrols were sent to flush them out, destroy them, and to take prisoners if possible. I recall reminding Lt. Asgali Usman one day to bring in prisoners during one of the patrols he led. He and his men had armed encounters that day but returned in the afternoon empty-handed. When I asked why he brought no prisoners, his cryptic reply was, "Miyamatag na, uma-ato pa." Interpreted into English, this meant, "Even when dying, they still fought back." This spoke well of the enemy's courage, and the Freedom Fighters respected their valor.

In the Jolo island campaign only those who succeeded in escaping to the American lines were taken prisoner. The very last enemy survivors withdrawing to Mt. Simunaan managed to get through to the U.S. lines and surrendered to its commander, Lt. Col. Corns. There were fewer than a hundred. And that was about all that was left of them.

Key officers assigned to the 3rd Battalion Philippine Army were

- Maj. Marcelo Bonilla, Commanding (Not SAC from the Sulu Area Command)
- Capt. Ismael Ratag, Executive Officer
- Capt. Fabian Sindayen, Operations Officer
- 1st Lt. Islani Sapal, Intelligence Officer
- 2nd Lt. Julhari Sapal, Commanding Hq. & Hq. Service Co.
- Capt. Engracio Guligado, Commanding "J" Co.
- Capt. Kalingalan Kaluang, Commanding "K" Co.
- Capt. Calvin Navata, Commanding "L" Co.
- Capt. Abdurahim Imao, Commanding "M" Co.

It was estimated that before the guerrilla offensive the enemy on Jolo island numbered over 6,000.

In his book *A Diary of Defeat*, Akiyoshi Fujioka, a Japanese soldier lucky enough to make it back to Japan after the war, estimated there were about 3,400 Japanese soldiers during the final phase of the guerrilla offensive in the Jolo island campaign. Of this number, less than 3 percent made it back to Japan alive. More than 97 percent were lost on Jolo island, a death rate believed to be hardly equalled anywhere during the entire course of the war.

The data were not unexpected, nor were they a surprise. Looking back into the history of the Sulu warriors of yesteryear, one realizes they fought a bitter and uninterrupted war for over three centuries against the might of Spain when she was at the height of her power, and proved to be too strong for the Spanish conquistadors. This record of continuous warfare is still to be equalled in the entire history of military aggression.

When American forces came to occupy Sulu at the turn of this century, and tried to impose their will on its people, the Sulu warriors fought the new aggressors and were willing to risk annihilation for what they believed in. In the Battle of Clouds at Bud Dajo in 1906 against American forces armed with artillery and gatling guns, it was reported that of the 1,000 Sulu warriors, only 6 men escaped the carnage. They fought stubbornly and ferociously and refused to surrender. Again, in the Battle of Bud Bagsac in 1913, the Sulu warriors were almost annihilated to the last man. Death in battle was welcomed by these warriors.

Against the Japanese invaders during World War II, the Sulu warriors also risked annihilation on the island of Tawi-Tawi against enemy assault forces six times their number, supported by dozens of bombers and naval craft. Yet, the grim and gaunt Freedom Fighters, mauled and decimated, prevailed. After receiving arms and ammunition by submarine, their number rejuvenated by hundreds of new recruits, they went on the offensive with a vengeance and practically annihilated the enemy forces in the Sulu archipelago which numbered about 10,000. Only those who reached American lines were taken prisoner, and those who succeeded in escaping to Borneo by kumpit and bamboo rafts survived.

A freelance photojournalist working for Nippon Hose Kyokai (NHK), Mr. Shinichi Toda, who was preparing a manuscript in connection with the 50th Anniversary of Pearl Harbor, visited Capt. Calvin Navata

(Ret.) on Jolo in 1991. Navata, who was the commander of Combat Company, the "fightingest" guerrilla unit in the Sulu Area Command in World War II, wrote to inform me that Mr. Toda met with him on Jolo. Among other information, Toda wanted to know why so few prisoners were taken from Sulu during World War II.

In the final phase of the Sulu campaign in World War II, the Japanese forces, cut off from reinforcements but refusing to surrender to the Sulu warriors, were left to fight to the end. The guerrillas, although still outnumbered and outgunned, brought the fight to them and attacked them incessantly with a vengeance. The Japanese were gradually decimated. The enemy's only chance of survival was escaping to Borneo in rafts or native boats, or finding their way to American lines.

In his meeting with Shinichi Toda, Capt. Calvin Navata spoke of the valor of the Japanese soldiers. He explained:

They refused to surrender to us, and we respected their decision. They were therefore left with only four choices, each no less unattractive than the others: to run away and perish, to fight and get killed, to surrender and die, or commit hara-kiri.\*

This was Navata's reply to the Japanese photojournalist during the interview.

As a young guerrilla fighter still in my teens, it was truly a rare privilege and opportunity to have fought side by side with the brave Sulu Freedom Fighters through those days of horror and bitter privations. I have seen some of my fellow guerrillas mowed down by machine gun fire and smashed by shrapnel. I have witnessed them die of hunger and disease. They died with their faith and loyalty to their country unshaken and undampened to the very end.

### **The Uniqueness of the Sulu Area Command**

The Sulu Area Command (SAC) of World War II was unique for many reasons. The Sulu Freedom Fighters extended their intelligence opera-

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\* From a letter of Capt. Calvin Navata, of Combat Company, and a subsequent interview I had with him in New York in 1995.

tions beyond the borders of the Sulu archipelago—to Palawan and Mindanao in the north, and to Celebes, Sumatra, and Borneo in the south. Its combat operations extended beyond the geographical confines of the Sulu archipelago, into Borneo where they raided Japanese garrisons and outposts for arms, ammunitions and supplies, assisted Chinese guerrillas in Borneo to fight a common enemy, and freed Allied prisoners in concentration camps on Berjala island near Sandakan in Borneo to join them in the fight for freedom.

Leadership in the Sulu Area Command was never in question. Col. Alejandro Suarez, who was half Muslim, was a living legend during our guerrilla days, and he held his guerrilla forces composed of Tausugs, Christians, Chinese and Bajaos as strong, fierce, and loyal Freedom Fighters. Along this vein, it did not matter to his fighters if ranks were given scrupulously and based primarily on combat leadership and aggressiveness. Considering the aggressiveness of the Sulu Freedom Fighters, no one was elevated to the rank above that of Major. Suarez himself was a lieutenant Colonel in the Philippine Constabulary when the war broke out, and no one rose above that rank. Neither did Suarez promote himself even if he commanded a two regiment guerrilla force at the latter part of the war. He may have had his personal reasons, but I strongly believed that he could have been more liberal with promotions, considering the fact that the Sulu Freedom Fighters practically annihilated mostly through combat the over ten thousand fully armed Japanese forces in Sulu who outnumbered them, and killed their commanding general. Only those who reached American lines to surrender and few of those who succeeded in escaping to Borneo were saved.

The Sulu seas were heavily mined by the enemy in anticipation of the American invasion. Col. Suarez formed auxiliary Human Mine Sweeping Units made up of fishermen, pearl divers, and seafaring sailors which cleared the Sulu seas of hundreds of mines without casualties. When American forces invaded and landed in Tawi-Tawi and Jolo in April 1945, the seas were declared free of mines by the U.S. Navy mine-sweeping craft. The Human Mine-Sweeping Units were highly commended by the U.S. Navy. Many of them were incorporated in the regular guerrilla forces.

In the Sulu jungles, pride swelled and heartbeats quickened as some members of the guerrilla forces listened to evening broadcasts from General MacArthur's headquarters in Australia. The radio broadcast was in Tausug, the main language of the Filipino Muslims. We felt that this

was MacArthur's way of recognizing and honoring the Sulu guerrillas' contributions to the Allied war efforts.

Throughout its history the profoundest ideology and aspiration of the people of Sulu has been freedom. While most of the Sulu guerrilla fighters were Muslim, making up about eighty percent of the guerrilla forces, the rest were Christians who lived in Sulu. Some were born in the province; others were half Muslims, or were married to Muslims. Most of the Christian Freedom Fighters, like their Muslim brothers, had an understanding of the basic Muslim teachings and had knowledge of their customs, traditions and their culture. I was born of Christian parents in Tubig-Indangan, Simulul, Sulu, only a stone's throw from Sheik Makkdum mosque, the first Muslim mosque built in the Philippines in 1360. My parents were pioneer teachers who volunteered to work in Sulu before World War II.





## Epilogue **Brotherhood Carried into the Future**

**T**he loyalty and brotherhood shared by members of the Sulu Area Command, forged during the dark and trying days in the jungles, were carried into the future. In 1962, seventeen years after the Sulu guerrillas reverted to inactive status, I returned as a surgeon in plastic and reconstructive surgery, after having trained in the foremost plastic surgery center of America, the Washington University School of Medicine and the Barnes Hospital Group in St. Louis, Missouri. How I got accepted to this prestigious plastic surgery training center where only six vacancies were available, three of which had already been reserved for top trainees of the United States Armed Forces—the Navy, Army and Air Force, is attributed to “Barakat Tawi-Tawi” or the Tawi-Tawi miracle. Many of the Sulu guerrillas believed in miracles. It seemed impossible that one from the remotest island of the southernmost province in the Philippines could be accepted. I had no special talents that the hundreds of other applicants did not have.

One of the first projects I did upon returning to the Philippines in 1962 after training abroad was to conduct a medical mission to Sulu. Mr. Yusop Tan, a brilliant Muslim official of the Commission on National Integration, and a brother of a coguerrilla officer in the Sulu Area Command, Lt. Anton Tan, helped me by making the necessary arrangements with the Sulu Provincial Hospital officials and medical staff. This was the first medical mission ever conducted in Sulu.

We served many indigent patients, especially children with congenital and acquired deformities. This became the precursor of the organization I later founded, the Espaldon Balikbayan Medical Mission, which conducted for over a decade medical missionary work biannually in Tawi-Tawi, Sulu, Basilan, Zamboanga del Sur, Zamboanga del Norte, and Cotabato.

As founder of this nonprofit organization I was later conferred in 1981 a Special Award for Humanitarian Services by the Autonomous

Government of Region IX in Zamboanga City during the Sixth Centennial celebration of Islam in the Philippines. I also received the Most Outstanding Filipino Overseas Award by the Philippine Government and by the Philippine Jaycees in 1982 for Public Service.

In later years, the medical mission organization, now called the Guam Balikbayan Medical Missions, Inc., extended its operations to the Visayas and to Luzon. It also helped establish other medical missions including what is now probably the largest medical mission group in the United States, the Aloha Medical Missions based in Hawaii. The Aloha Medical Missions conduct yearly medical missions to the Philippines, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China, in addition to maintaining medical projects for new immigrants and for the homeless in Hawaii, since 1983.

It took another decade, in February 1974, before my next visit to Sulu. I was busy starting a surgical practice in Guam while at the same time conducting medical missions to the islands of Saipan, Yap, Palau, Truk, and Ponpei in Micronesia. Not fully aware of what was transpiring in Mindanao, I learned from a homily while attending mass in Baguio that Jolo town was put to the torch in a major armed conflict between government forces and Muslim rebels called the Muslim National Liberation Front (MNLF). They demanded the secession of Mindanao from the rest of the country. With my guerrilla memories still vivid, I found myself on a plane bound for Jolo.

At a stopover in the Zamboanga City airport, Major Yusop Kalbit of the police force, a coguerrilla of yesteryears, recognized me and frantically informed me that a war was going on. He whisked me to the Southern Command Headquarters at Cawa-Cawa, the main military camp in Mindanao. To my surprise this military facility was on red alert and was expecting an attack by a large rebel force led by Commander Al Caluang, field marshall of the MNLF. Commander Caluang, I found out, was the son of a fierce Freedom Fighter and a good friend during our guerrilla days, Capt. Kalingalan Kaluang. His mother was my classmate during prewar days in the Sulu High School; and his wife was the daughter of a gallant coguerrilla officer, Capt. Abdulhamid Lukman. Commander Al Caluang did not go through with the attack after knowing about the new military overall commander who had taken over.

The overall commander of government forces in Mindanao, Comodore Gil Fernandez, had just been relieved. At this point in time the

rebel forces were practically in control of Sulu. In Fernandez's place was designated another graduate of Kings Point Academy in New York, Commodore Romulo M. Espaldon. Espaldon had spent most of his life in Sulu except for the time he attended the U.S. Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, where he graduated with honors. He was familiar with the customs, the culture, and traditions of the Muslims. Accompanied by Major Kalbit to the SouthCom headquarters, I was informed that my brother, Commander Espaldon, was out on patrol on a Navy ship. I was asked by the military officers at headquarters the purpose of my visit. I replied, "I want to proceed to Jolo." The interrogator explained, "There is nothing to see in Jolo. The town was razed to the ground by the rebels." It was obvious that they did not want me to proceed to Jolo. Fighting was still going on.

Fortunately Commodore Espaldon arrived that afternoon. He was surprised to see me. He then explained that the reason for his urgent naval patrol was to fetch Mayor Barlie Abubakar who wanted to surrender to the military forces. When Jolo town was put to the torch by the rebels a few days earlier during a massive armed confrontation with government forces, the mayor decided to escape with the rebels. His son, who was one of the rebel commanders, urged the mayor to join them. However, Mayor Barlie had a change of heart. He realized that he had a responsibility to the government. He sent feelers that he would like to surrender, but only to Commodore Espaldon. This was the reason the SouthCom commander was not present when I arrived.

"Mayor Barlie is on the ship," he told me, and explained the circumstances of the mayor's surrender. "May I see him?" I asked. "Sure," he replied. Barlie, besides being our co-guerrilla fighter during the world war, was also my schoolmate and close friend at the Sulu High School before the war. The Constabulary colonel interrogating the mayor was surprised when he received a note from the commodore giving me permission to talk to Mayor Barlie Abubakar. The colonel felt obliged to give me time with the mayor. We spoke in Tausug. After exchanging pleasantries I asked him, "Is there anything you want me to do?" His reply was, "Romie will know what to do for me." With that we parted as good friends just like old times.

Knowing that I wanted to visit Jolo, the SouthCom commander not only gave me permission to go to Jolo but also accompanied me to Jolo. Fighting was still going on, fires still raging, and the roads were not yet

cleared of land mines. He gave me an escort of Marines in a jeep to visit places I wanted, while he conferred with his military commanders. With Marines as my security we drove along old familiar places, now in ashes. We saw people scrounging for food and came across corpses along the way. We passed by the old Trade High School crammed with refugees. Then we reached the provincial hospital, crowded with victims of the conflagrations. There I saw children, their eyes sunken, and hungry not only for food but for love. I heard wails of people in pain. I saw widowed mothers waiting hopelessly for their loved ones that were never to return. The wounded were trying to get treatment, while others walked aimlessly, with no homes to return to. As all these unfolded before my eyes, my mind raced back to Guam—the peace, the prosperity—and I asked myself, “How can I turn my back knowing that not far away our sisters and brothers live from day to day in fear and in agony, where children hungered not only for food but for love, and where wails of pain rang in my ears?”

On that day the Espaldon Balikbayan Medical Mission was born. Why the name Espaldon to a Medical Mission? Because I sincerely felt then that the name had become a password for peace and brotherhood in Sulu, whether in military or rebel territories. In this humanitarian project, danger and risks were ever present, and I felt a password would help.

### **Creation of Tawi-Tawi Province**

For strategic and logistic purposes the government decided to create Tawi-Tawi into a new province, separating it from Sulu. Appointed as the new governor was Romulo Espaldon. By this time he had been elevated to the rank of rear admiral. His job was truly risky and I tried to be with him whenever possible to give all my moral support.

Before the inauguration of the new province Admiral Espaldon received a message from a Tawi-Tawi rebel group that wanted to be present during the inauguration “to give it more meaning,” whatever that meant. It was signed by Commander Buzon Sarabi. Tawi-Tawi then was practically in rebel hands. On the morning of the inauguration there was a good crowd and, of course, military security was tight. Espaldon’s instructions to his security, however, was to be watchful but not to provoke any incident. Just before he took his oath, a big armed group was seen approaching. Pandemonium broke loose. The crowd eventually settled

when they saw Commander Sarabi approach Admiral Espaldon and embrace him. The other rebel commanders followed. Espaldon was sure Sarabi would not cause him any harm.

The rebel commander and many of his men were once Freedom Fighters in the hills with Espaldon, attacking Japanese forces in Tawi-Tawi in years gone by. This event of commanders embracing Admiral Espaldon during the inauguration ushered in the collapse of the rebellion in Tawi-Tawi. There were holdouts under MNLF Commander Jerry Mathba but Marines under Colonel Betita and later Col. Balbas battled him. Mathba finally surrendered to Admiral Espaldon. The Admiral gave him back his arms and assigned him to secure northern Tawi-Tawi for the government.

When Admiral Espaldon took over the command of government military forces in Mindanao, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, he immediately initiated a policy of pacification and reconciliation, even if he had the military forces to meet the MNLF rebels head on. His strategy started to work, to the dismay of the MNLF high command, who by now held the upper hand. The rebels blamed their reverses on the effective policies of Espaldon. They decided to get rid of the admiral whose policies were effective and who also knew the dialects, the culture, customs and traditions of the Muslims. An assassin was therefore assigned to get rid of Admiral Espaldon. The Admiral was within the gun sights of the assassin on several occasions during his meetings with the people, but the assassin could not pull the trigger because of the crowd who surged to approach, to embrace and kiss the target. The assassin found out that the admiral was not the way he was pictured by his rebel superiors. He saw that Espaldon was so sincere and well-intentioned in trying to help with their problems that in turn the assassin eventually surrendered with his arms.

In a major conference between the MNLF hierarchy and Philippine government negotiators in the presence of Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) officials in a Middle East country and Col. Muammar Khadafi of Libya, Espaldon chanced upon Judge Abdulhamid Lukman, who was a member of the MNLF group, and devised a plan for a secret meeting with the judge. A few months later Judge Lukman found a way back to Sulu from the Middle East and agreed to return to the fold of the law. Espaldon appointed him assistant commissioner of Muslim Affairs. Judge Lukman and Admiral Espaldon, with their troops, battled

Japanese forces in Tawi-Tawi in World War II. Lukman outranked Espaldon then. Indeed their friendship had not waned.

In one of Admiral Espaldon's official visits to Jolo aboard a Philippine Navy vessel, the first to pay him a call was Princess Tarhata Kiram. It happened to be in Jolo with my medical mission team. It was my first time to meet the princess. She was so gracious and kind, especially when the admiral introduced me as a doctor and as his brother. They both asked me to join the conference. The princess was a local leader and a member of Sulu's royal family, and the conference lasted for over two hours. I recall her parting words. "If the admiral would allow me to speak my mind, may I say that the admiral is too good. When rebels surrender with their arms, he accepts them and even offers to give back some of their arms. As the admiral knows, some of these rebels have returned to the hills. They take advantage of his kindness." Admiral Espaldon listened intently, then replied, "Princess, thank you for your sincerity and candor, but they will return." And most of them did return in peace. The princess was referring to Commander Maas Bawang who, with his rebel troops, gave the military forces a difficult time.

Rear Admiral Romulo M. Espaldon retired in 1980. President Marcos, wanting to take advantage of his wisdom and sincerity in bringing peace to Mindanao, created the Ministry of Muslim Affairs with cabinet rank, and appointed Admiral Espaldon as its first minister. Espaldon in turn appointed a brilliant young lawyer, Datu Michael O. Mastura, a great-great-grandson of Sultan Kudarat of Mindanao, as his deputy. Espaldon has since embraced the Muslim faith and remained a true Muslim. A true Muslim is "one who submits his entire life to the will of God." To emphasize the similarity of the Christian and Muslim faiths, Christians pray, "Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In a section of the *Manila Times* dated 28 June 1993 edited by Manuel F. Martinez on the topic "Who Are Our National Heroes," Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Florencio Magsino wrote,

Another prospective national hero is Romulo Espaldon. As SovesCom, and later SouthCom Commander, he was the person most responsible for the ceasefire agreement in 1976 between the RP government and the secessionist rebels, and for defusing the Mindanao problems.

Many others, of course, contributed to the government's success in this national crisis, but it was Espaldon's strategic and personal efforts that

accounted for the tens of thousands of rebel returnees who flocked back to the folds of the law as to knock out the wind from the secessionist movement and to stop the national hemorrhage in blood, funds, property, and sufferings. Even the secessionist rebels themselves would gladly support his appointment as a national hero because his policy of pacification and reconciliation won them over to his side.

### **Problems of the Muslim South**

My visits to various places in the Philippines working with medical mission groups during the last 25 years have opened my eyes to the plight of the majority of the population. Poverty stalks the land, but nowhere is this more acute than in the Muslim south. The problems of the Filipino Muslims are so complex that they require multipronged approaches and solutions. There need to be truly sincere and well-intentioned efforts to help solve these problems. The approaches must be viewed in the context of their Islamic heritage and historical experience which requires some understanding, if not some special recognition. Some of their peculiar customs and traditions can pose problems in their integration into the national body politic and in persuading them to the ways that exemplify them as Filipino citizens.

The poverty of most of the Muslim communities results from unsustained peace and order, and to the early withdrawal of children from school so that they could work and help in the family livelihood. Education and opportunity for gainful occupation are among the primary needs of the Muslim population. Education appears to be the best way to redirect their attitudes from the hold of traditions, to teach them that they could take attitudes and practices of Philippine citizenship without having to recant their duties as faithful Muslims. Education will teach them that they will be protected in the full exercise of their religion.

More educational institutions sensitive to Muslim feelings and needs should be established. The educational systems should not only extol Christian heroes, but also Muslim heroes who fought as fiercely and even longer for freedom. Through education, Filipino Christians and Muslims will get to know each other more—their cultures, customs, traditions, and even religions—and therefore will be more understanding and more tolerant of each other.

History books of the Philippines, if written fully and without prejudice, should show that the Muslim Filipinos gave the earliest and longest armed resistance to foreign invaders. Prior to the establishment of the Spanish hegemony over Luzon and the Visayas, the Tausug Sultanate of Sulu set up in 1450 A.D. and the Sultanate of Kudarat Magindanao set up in the 1500's were the most powerful political entities in the Philippine archipelago. Yet, most of the present history books written of the Filipino people, are preoccupied with the glorious 1896 syndrome and have ignored richer events before this period. While in earlier centuries the Filipino Muslims fought to repel invaders, and thus prevented them from conquering their lands and altering their religion, their Filipino brothers and sisters in the north also fought as hard, but to expel colonizers who had already secured foothold of their lands and who had succeeded in introducing a religion. There is, therefore, a need to reconstruct history books so that the records will be strong and truthful in the incorporation of materials about the Muslim Filipinos. To incorporate a truly representative history of the Filipino nation, even the Filipino flag, needs study and probably revisions and alterations that all Filipinos will be truly proud of.

Among the principal instruments devised by the Philippine government to implement its initial integration policy was the establishment of the Commission on National Integration in 1957. It was a laudable project and its aims were truly encompassing. They were never fully implemented, however, nor was the educational process for better understanding of the policy pursued.

Recommendations of foremost Muslim Filipino moderates, Dean Cesar Majul and Former Senator Mamintal Tamano, should be looked into again, possibly updated and implemented. We reproduce some of the recommendations below.

1. A moratorium on new settlers should be imposed, among others, until Muslim traditional areas have been given to landless members of the Muslim Filipinos, as a first priority.
2. Law enforcement agents in Moroland should be Muslims since they know not only the religion but the customs, traditions and culture of the Muslim people. Muslim Filipino leaders have time and again agitated that the Moro provinces be restructured as an autonomous state or states federally related to the republic.

Atty. Michael O. Mastura, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, has pointed out that Italy, whose unitary form of



government provided special autonomy for Sicily and other regions which reserves to them powers and functions according to principles fixed by the Italian Constitution. This concept should be studied and could probably be adopted in the Philippines.

Former Senator Mamintal Tamano has also indicated the position of Atjeh in Indonesia as an arrangement which might work for the Philippines. Ateh was a rebellious province in Sumatra after World War II that demanded recognition as an "autonomous state with a separate army." Indonesia had by then adopted a unitary rather than a federal system, but the government in Jakarta made Atjeh a federal province with full autonomy on local matters. The Atjehnese army was also made an integral part of the Indonesian National Army. With these major concessions offered by the Indonesian government, the Atjehnese rebellion collapsed and peace was restored.

3. More educational institutions sensitive to Filipino Muslim feelings and needs should be established.
4. Government should not only encourage but vigorously pursue economic progress.
5. Muslim Filipinos should be encouraged and helped to be better Muslims.
6. Important elements of Islamic law should be allowed for Muslims.
7. The national government should have greater Filipino Muslim participation. Although the national government has implemented many of the recommendations, vigorous efforts towards increased Filipino Muslim participation in the national government should be continuously applied.

There is a desperate need to bring to the Muslim south reconciliation and peace, to offer good education, economic opportunities and socio-medical justice, especially to the countryside.

The experience brought forth by the Sulu Freedom Fighters during World War II is an articulation of the fact that Muslim and Christian Filipinos can live together, sacrifice together, fight together and if need be, give up their lives together—as many did—for God and country. They knew that theirs is the same God, theirs is the same country, and with justice, theirs will be one nation undivided.

# WITH THE BRAVEST

THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE SULU FREEDOM FIGHTERS OF WORLD WAR II

## From the Foreword

"This book has been in continuous preparation by its author for over a decade, recounting events from memory, researching, gathering records available, communicating with and interviewing surviving former comrades-in-arms, all of them now in their twilight years. This project has brought him all over the country and even to foreign lands including the United States and Malaysia.

"The author fought alongside the gallant Sulu warriors of World War II as a fighting lineman and later as one of its commanders, suffering with them the most bitter privations during those dark and grim days of Japanese occupation...

"The Sulu Freedom Fighters of World War II preserved a tradition set by Sulu warriors of old ... [they] drove what was left of the decimated enemy forces from their shores, and remained free."



**ERNESTO M. ESPALDON** was born on 11 November 1926 in Tubig-indangan, Simunul, Tawi-Tawi. During World War II he joined the Sulu guerrilla movement at the age of 16 as a fighting lineman and later as a guerrilla commander—the youngest in the Sulu Area Command.

After the war he completed his high school education, took up medicine at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, and pursued a general surgery residency training at the University of Oklahoma Medical Center, then specialized in plastic and reconstructive surgery at the Washington University School of Medicine, and the Barnes Hospital Group, in St. Louis, Missouri.

Dr. Espaldon became the first Filipino American diplomate of the American Board of Plastic Surgery. He is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and also of the Philippine College of Surgeons.

He decided to practice his specialty in Guam and Micronesia, which has given him the opportunity to conduct medical missionary work in depressed and underserved areas in the Philippines and Micronesia for the last three decades. He was recently featured in a book, *Profiles in Excellence: The Filipino Achievers in the U.S.A. and Canada*. He is also listed in *Who's Who in America* (1990/1991) and in *Who's Who in the World* (1991/1992).

Dr. Espaldon also served as a senator in the Guam Legislature for six terms. He is married to the former Leticia Legaspi Virata, also a physician, and their home is blessed with six children.

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